

CEDARVILLE UNIVERSITY

ROMANS 13:1-7 – A CONTEXTUALLY-APPROPRIATE READING

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BY

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Introduction

This study rests upon a crucial presupposition: without context, words can mean anything and everything, and therefore mean nothing. It is only through the delimiting influence of context that words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs are endowed with significance. Although this concept seems simple and justified enough, it is often forgotten within the field of biblical exegesis. Due to influences as simple as our versification of the biblical text and as complex as the historical/theological developments which have dictated how we teach and interpret the Scriptures, many exegetes (wittingly or unwittingly) ignore context when trying to ascertain the meaning of particular biblical texts.

An adequate case study of this phenomenon is the interpretation(s) of Romans 13:1-7, a text that has been used to justify everything from utter obedience to totalitarian regimes to unquestioning support of harsh anti-immigration laws. These seven verses from Paul's epistle to the Romans have been grossly abused at numerous points since their original composition. In Romans 13:1-7, Paul exhorts the Roman believers to apply his previous commands toward love (12:9), harmony (12:16), and peace (12:18) in the context of obedience to government (13:1-5) and the payment of taxes (13:6-7). Far from being a comprehensive condensation of the apostle's beliefs regarding any and all governments past and present, this passage is a specific and historically-conditioned pastoral address to the Roman believers, discouraging them from political unrest, disobedience, and rebellion in order to protect their testimony and the effectiveness of the Roman church in the gospel mission. This thesis will be "proven" by appealing to the historical context of the original audience and the overarching context of Romans 12:9-13:10 in which this passage rests.

Historical Context

When Romans 13:1-7 is read as if it was written in a modern North American context, it seems as though Paul is appealing to the sovereignty of God in the affairs of nations to remind us of the divinely-appointed nature of our free-market economy and federal constitutional republic. All of this is supposedly done to prompt us toward active participation in our civil government and unquestioning obedience to all of its laws. After all, these verses come up in discussions of Christian political involvement, debates on just war theory vs. pacifism, and diatribes against illegal immigrants and those who desire to aid them. However, using these seven verses as a packet theology of church and state is problematic, even within the Pauline corpus alone. The same man who wrote Romans 13 also frequently took up themes in his writings that would challenge the power and authority of the Roman Empire, for

the declaration that Jesus is Lord contains the implicit declaration that Caesar is not. Our understanding of these seven verses must therefore be able to mesh with other passages (such as Phil 2:6-11; 3:20-21; 1 Thess 1:9-10; and 4:13-5:11) and their implications on relations between church and state.¹

Many commentators in recent years have recognized the importance of interpreting this passage in light of its historical context at the time of its composition (c. A.D. 57²), instead of assuming that these verses are Paul's fundamental views on how church and state should relate to each other.³ Knowledge of the situation facing the Roman Christians in A.D. 57 is crucial to the interpretation of this text. Emperor Claudius had expelled Jews from the city of Rome in A.D. 49, removing Jewish believers from the Roman church and therefore leaving only Gentile Christians behind in their stead.⁴ However, Claudius was killed by his wife Agrippina in A.D. 54, and her son Nero advanced to the throne that same year, immediately allowing the Jews to return to the city. When Romans was written by Paul in A.D. 57, the Empire enjoyed a period of peace that looked quite different from the chaos that would characterize the later years of Nero's reign. Guided by his advisor Seneca, Nero made promises of a different and better peace than the *pax romana* of Augustus. He promised true peace, characterized by restraint and the peaceful resistance to using force in order to govern. While these promises were dashed beginning in A.D. 59, with Nero's matricide, the loss of his advisors, and the beginning of his persecution of Christians, it is crucial to remember that Paul wrote Romans during the period of hopeful peace from A.D. 54-59. Romans 13:1-7 should not, therefore, be interpreted as if it were written to Roman believers in the later years of Nero's reign, when persecution and oppression were rampant, for this would unduly strengthen Paul's "pro-Empire" sentiments here.⁵

¹ A full analysis of the legitimacy of an anti-imperial Pauline hermeneutic far exceeds the scope of this study. Wright (2004: 82-88 and 2005: 69-79) emphasizes what he sees to be Paul's anti-imperial themes throughout his writings, and I am indebted to him for the concept of Jesus' vs. Caesar's lordship. For an even-handed overview and analysis of this topic, consult Kim (2008), who makes the case that a strong anti-imperial Pauline hermeneutic is difficult to maintain. Despite Kim's conclusions, however, it seems unwise to completely ignore the implications of Christ's lordship on both Roman believers in the first century and on North American ones today. The fact that Romans 13:1-7 is such a stumbling block to those in the anti-imperial camp and such an "anomaly" when compared with the implications of Paul's anti-imperial passages (such as 1 Thess 5, alluded to by Wright [2005]) seems to necessitate a nuanced approach that hears the arguments of those on both sides of this theological debate.

² The commentaries and resources consulted in this study provided A.D. 57 as a consensus view of the date of composition of Paul's epistle to the Romans.

³ (Kim 2008: 37), who points to P. Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary*, trans. S. J. Hafeman (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 198-208; J. A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* AB 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 662-63. Also, consult Dunn (1988: 768-69).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵ The background information in this paragraph comes from the helpful discussion in Witherington III (2004: 304-6).

With this background information, it is easy to see why Paul here gives advice to his readers, a cosmopolitan church in Rome struggling to figure out Jew-Gentile dynamics in the early years of Nero's reign, so as to prevent them from drawing negative attention to themselves and damaging the effectiveness of the gospel mission. Although things were presumably "going well," as mentioned above, Paul knew full well that things could get tense for the Roman believers very quickly. Despite the period of relative peace from A.D. 54-59, tensions were rising in Rome in A.D. 57-58 regarding the particularly nasty practice of indirect taxation. Furthermore, the Jewish believers who had returned to the city in A.D. 54 might not have been on the best terms with neither the Roman authorities nor the Gentile believers. Much of what Paul has to say in this epistle speaks to this issue: the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians within the Roman context. It is not, therefore, unreasonable to assume that this played a role in the social tension Paul here addresses in Romans 13:1-7. Furthermore, revolutionary sentiments were in vogue at this time among the Jews in Palestine, and Paul was perhaps worried that the fervor would spread to the Roman church and quickly create some serious problems given the tensions within the church and its social context.⁶

Positively, then, when Romans was written, the original audience enjoyed a period of relative peace and stability before the chaotic upheaval that would take place in A.D. 59. Negatively, there was still quite a bit of tension within and around the Roman church which had the potential to divide the church and get the Christians in serious trouble with Roman authorities if rebellion became the rallying cry for the followers of Jesus, assured of the lordship of their King and the reality of his kingdom. It is therefore a mistake to read Romans 13:1-7 as a justification of the sins of the state, as if this passage gave a *carte blanche* to the atrocities to be committed in the later years of Nero's reign. Paul was capable of saying negative things about pagan governments when they were going awry⁷, but he nevertheless appealed to God's sovereignty over human governments in order to prevent the tense situation of his audience from erupting into a social upheaval that would wreck the church's testimony and hinder the gospel mission in the city of Rome and the empire over which that city ruled. His audience then (and

⁶ Consult the discussion in Kim (2008: 37) for a helpful counterbalance to the optimistic portrait painted by Witherington III (2004: 304-6). I am also very much indebted to the discussion as the source of the historical information in this paragraph.

⁷ Cf. Witherington III (2004: 307): "That Paul could say very different and negative things about the state when the state was malfunctioning at the end of Claudius' reign seems clear enough from 1 and 2 Thessalonians, particularly in 2 Thessalonians 2." And also consider Wright's (2004: 86) insistence that Paul had the ability to critique human government: "...in those stories (his visit to Philippi in Acts 16, for instance, or his trial before the Jewish authorities in Acts 23), that precisely when the authorities are getting it all wrong and acting illegally or unjustly Paul has no hesitation in telling them their proper business and insisting that they should follow it."

readers of the epistle today) would not therefore be expected to never challenge the government or abstain from promoting or participating in its practices, as Romans 13:1-7 has often been used to argue. Instead, they were (and are) to wisely interact with human governments, not seeking to cause any trouble in society that would damage their testimony, but not hesitating to stand firm in the cause of Christ their King when human governments do things contrary to the kingdom of God.⁸ Wright pulls these themes together quite well:

[P]recisely because of all the counter-imperial hints Paul has given not only in this letter and elsewhere but indeed by his entire gospel, it is vital that he steer Christians away from the assumption that loyalty to Jesus would mean the kind of civil disobedience and revolution that merely reshuffles the political cards into a different order. [...] The main thing Paul wants to emphasize is that, *even though Christians are servants of the Messiah, the true lord, this does not give them carte blanche to ignore the temporary subordinates whose appointed task, whether (like Cyrus) they know it or not, is to bring at least a measure of God's order and justice to the world. The church must live as a sign of the kingdom yet to come, but since that kingdom is characterized by justice, peace, and joy in the Spirit [14.17], it cannot be inaugurated in the present by violence and hatred.*⁹

These sentiments and those outlined above will now be augmented by a brief examination of Roman 13:1-7 within the overarching context of Romans 12:9-13:10.¹⁰

Romans 12:9-13:10

The passage at hand only makes sense within the overarching context of Romans 12:9-13:10. Although Paul undoubtedly changes topics at 13:1, the thematic links between 13:1-7 and 12:9-21 are difficult to ignore.

Κακος (“evil”) and αγαθος (“good”) occur in Rom 12:17, 21 and 13:3-4. Οργη (“wrath”) is mentioned in 12:19

⁸ **Passionate Aside:** The main problem, then, in applying this passage today, is a very narrow vision of what God's kingdom entails. That is, “obey your government unless it tells you to do something contrary to the Word of God” is a common enough teaching in the church today, but our vision of God's redemptive mission is so emaciated that it causes us to miss glaring issues of concern (immigration, warfare, racism, etc.) in our society today. We rape the Scriptures when Romans 13:1-7 is used to justify such ignorance of and even the active participation in streams of society, culture, and policy which go against the grain of God's kingdom.

⁹ (Wright 2005: 78-79), emphasis mine.

¹⁰ I am indebted to Dr. Robert Milliman and his blog-post *Love and War: Romans 13.1 – 7 in the Context of 12.9 – 13.10* (2011) for the initial idea of examining this passage in its context to avoid mis-readings of the text which have been used to justify everything from totalitarian regimes to Christian service in the military.

and 13:4, 5. Also, conceptually, vengeance is mentioned in 12:19 and 13:4.¹¹ It is therefore quite reasonable to see a connection between 13:1-7 and 12:9-21.

The links between this passage and the one immediately preceding it, however, should not overshadow the importance of the thematic verses earlier in 12:1-2. There Paul effectively redefines the people of God as no longer just Jews, but Gentiles as well. This is a common enough theme throughout the entire epistle and in almost all of Paul's writings,¹² but in Romans 12:1-15:13, it is of particular importance. Having spent the first eleven chapters of the epistle explaining the identity of the people of God as a mix of Jews and Gentiles and defending the covenant loyalty of God in the process, Paul now devotes chapters 12-15 to redefining the "rule of life" of the people of God.¹³ In 12:9-21, Paul proclaims "love as the fundamental moral imperative in human relationships,"¹⁴ urging his readers to pursue harmony (12:16) and peace (12:18). He then redefines in 13:1-7 how the people of God in the church at Rome should relate to the power structures of the society in which they dwell.

Romans 12:9-21 is one of the most loosely-constructed passages in the entire epistle. This means that it would take quite a bit of time and space to comprehensively analyze the syntax and detailed meaning of the passage. However, some general observations are in order. The thematic verse of this paragraph is 12:9 (NET)¹⁵, "Love must be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil, cling to what is good." From there, Paul emphasizes the important manifestations of genuine love: mutual devotion and eagerness in showing honor (12:10), enthusiastic spiritual service (12:11), hopeful joy and persistent prayer in the face of suffering (12:12), and hospitably meeting the needs of the saints (12:13). Harmony is commanded within and outside the church, extending even to persecutors (12:14, 16). Instead of responding in kind to their persecutors and therefore being "overcome by evil" (12:21a), Paul urges them to live peaceably (12:17-18), forbidding them from taking vengeance into their own hands (12:19). Instead, the

¹¹ Schreiner (1998: 678) provides these examples of textual and conceptual links between the two passages. Dunn (1988: 758) also mentions the phrases *εκδικεω / εκδικος* (12:19; 13:4) and *παντων ανθρωπων / πασιν* (12:17-18; 13:7) to provide evidence for a link between the two passages, before demonstrating links between Romans 2:7-11 and 13:3-4 in order to refute the claims of some that this passage is a non-Pauline insertion.

¹² I appeal to Dr. Chris Miller's class notes from BENT 4110 – *Romans and Galatians* (Spring 2012), and also Wright's work on Romans (2004) to prove this point, for a complete discussion of this common theme exceeds the scope of this essay. However, for an overview of this theme in Romans, Dunn (1988: 705) cites Rom 1:16-17; 2:15, 17, 28-29; 3:20, 29; 4:16; 9:8, 12; 11:6, 30-32.

¹³ Dunn (1988: 705) sees chapters 12-15 as providing a replacement to Lev 18:5 ("this do and live") as the rule of life for the people of God: "... 'the walk in newness of life' as over against the walk in the ordinances of Israel's law (6:4), the service in newness of Spirit as over against oldness of letter (7:6), the obedience of faith in accord with the Spirit fulfilling the requirement of the law unconfused with Jewish 'works' (8:4)."

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 706.

¹⁵ All Bible quotations, unless otherwise noted, come from the NET Bible.

Roman believers are to “overcome evil with good” (12:21b), and this is illustrated in 12:20, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing this you will be heaping burning coals on his head.”

At this point after 12:21, most modern English readers of Scripture are confronted by a large “13” and perhaps a subject heading, such as “Submission to Civil Government.” The advantages of verse and chapter divisions for Bible reading and study are well-known. However, the chapter division here has had detrimental effects on the exegesis of this passage. Although seemingly a very minor change, it puts undue emphasis on Paul’s supposed change of topic, prompting the interpretations of many that this is Paul’s comprehensive theology of church and state relations, ignoring the passage’s context and the historical situation of the original audience, who would have heard this epistle read without the explanation of a chapter division or sub-heading. Romans 13:1-7 is most naturally read as the unpacking of the principles of 12:9-21, in the context of how Christians in Rome should behave in relation to the powers that governed the society in which they dwelt. It answers the implied question (after reading 12:9-21): “Paul, if we are to do these things (love genuinely, pursue harmony and peace, do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good, etc.), how should this apply in regards to our relationship with the rulers of our city and empire?”

The specific rules that governed the theocracy of ancient Israel no longer held sway for the international and multi-ethnic body of Christ. As noted above, the situation in Rome, although relatively peaceful, was still quite tense within and outside of the church. Jews and Gentiles were struggling to remain unified in the Messiah in spite of their cultural differences. Furthermore, Jews in Rome, only recently allowed back into the city, may have been culturally stigmatized as superstitious and unwanted. Tensions were building because of indirect taxation. And Jews in Palestine were growing more and more rebellious.¹⁶ It is not therefore hard to imagine why Paul felt the pastoral need to apply the principles of 12:9-21 to the realm of society and government. A “perfect storm” was brewing underneath the surface, one that could put the Christians in Rome at odds with not only each other but with the Roman Empire itself very quickly if the believers there tended towards promoting social unrest, perhaps due to an over-realized eschatology that would want to usher in the kingdom of God by overthrowing Roman rule. If the Christians in Rome made a wrong move, evil could quickly overcome them.

While a full analysis of the argument of the text at hand is beyond the scope of this essay, a brief trace of the thought-flow of Romans 13:1-7 will aid in comprehension of its contextually-appropriate meaning. The general

¹⁶ Here I summarize my conclusions from “Historical Background” above.

command to submit to the authorities is found in 13:1a, and is reiterated in 13:5. The first reason for this submission is that the authorities have been appointed by God (13:1b). Logically, then, those who oppose the authorities oppose “the ordinance of God” (13:2b). The consequence of disobeying the general command is therefore God’s judgment¹⁷ (13:2b). The second reason for submission is that the rulers are servants of God to commend good and to administer retribution to evil, although these two verses can also be seen as support for the claim that those who resist the authorities can expect judgment on earth¹⁸ (13:3-4). Paul then restates the main thesis of 13:1-4 in 13:5, urging his readers to submit because of “wrath” (they would face judgment if disobedient) and “conscience” (they would be opposing God’s ordinance). He then closes this paragraph with an appeal to the readers’ current practice of paying taxes in submission to the government (13:6), urging them therefore to continue respectfully in what they have already been doing (13:7).¹⁹

When unhindered by the chapter division, it is easy to see how Romans 13:1-7 relates to 12:9-21. The genuine love commanded in 12:9a would be quite hard to apply to the impersonal institution of the Roman government. On the other hand, it would have been quite easy for the rebellious attitudes of the Jews in Palestine to seep into the Roman context, prompting the Roman Christians to rebel and try and institute the kingdom of God in opposition to Roman rule. Paul steps in and applies the principles of non-violence, non-retribution, and enemy love (12:14, 17, 18-20) to the context of government and society. In order to “overcome evil with good” (12:21) when it came to the Roman powers, the believers in Rome were not to rebel violently or cause unnecessary civil unrest, but to submit to the governing authorities (13:1a) with the acknowledgment of God’s sovereignty over the said powers (13:1b). It would be a mistake, however, to go to the other end of the spectrum and argue that Paul is urging his audience to give unthinking and critical approval of everything the Roman government did. As mentioned above, Paul was more than willing to critique governments and empires for the sake of God’s kingdom and the cause of Christ. It would also be a mistake to argue that Romans 13:1-7 is a justification for the active participation in government activities (political office, warfare, etc.) both ancient and modern. Although God is still sovereign over modern nations, Paul’s argument here does not address the issue of active Christian participation in government because that was not on the radar of first-century Christian life in the Roman Empire. Instead, Paul’s main point is

¹⁷ Schreiner (1998: 679) notes that there is considerable debate as to whether this refers to the eschatological judgment of God or to judgment imposed by earthly rulers. He appeals to the structure of the text ($\gamma\alpha\rho$ in 3a) to conclude that the latter option is more likely.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 680.

¹⁹ I am indebted to Moo (1996: 794) and Schreiner (1998: 680) for this overview of the passage’s argument.

that his readers should not revolt, but that they should instead stay out of trouble by obeying the authorities and participating in the basic constructs of their society (i.e. paying taxes).

The argument for placing 13:1-7 in the overarching context of Paul's focus on genuine love in 12:9-13:10 is strengthened by his return to the topic of love in 13:8-10. After the sobering instruction to not rebel but to stay out of trouble and obey the governing authorities, Paul reminds his audience of the importance of love, not only of enemy (of which it could be strongly argued that the governing authorities were a subset!), but of neighbor. This returns the Roman Christians' focus to love as the central virtue of Christianity and the "fulfillment of the law" (13:8, 10). They were to faithfully follow Jesus the Messiah King, seeking to bring in his kingdom. But it was unthinkable to Paul to effect God's kingdom in a way that ran against the grain of that kingdom of love, justice, and peace. Therefore, in the middle of exhortations to genuinely love one's enemies and neighbors, Paul urges his audience to humbly obey their governing authorities so that they might remain faithful to their King's calling as they went about his work in the city of Rome.

Conclusion

Through the ignorance of the historical background of Paul's epistle to the Romans as a whole and his instructions in Romans 13:1-7 in particular, the passage at hand has been grossly mis-read and mis-applied in numerous ways since its original composition. Instead of an argument for unthinking obedience to, approval of, and participation in governments past and present, Paul here argues for the Christians in Rome not to revolt against the empire in an attempt to fully usher in God's kingdom, but to submit humbly to the Roman authorities as they sought to overcome evil with good. Having an understanding of both the historical background and the context of this passage in the overall argument of the epistle yields an appropriately nuanced view of Paul's pastoral concern for his audience expressed in these seven controversial verses. Although it is tempting to take this passage out of context and use it to justify opinions on everything from immigration to just war theory, the same hubris that Paul implicitly rebukes in these verses must be resisted if the Scriptures are to be heard and appropriated well. While some may wish that Romans 13:1-7 had more to say regarding the relationship between church and state, the passage certainly cannot say less than the main points briefly described above. Romans 13:1-7 is not a condensed theology of church and state, but a specific historically-conditioned pastoral address to the Roman believers, diverting them from rebellion and urging them towards humble submission in order to protect their testimony and thereby enhance their effectiveness in God's redemptive mission.

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