

THE CHRISTIAN LEGITIMATION OF NON-CHRISTIAN POWER IN ROMANS 13 AND 1 PETER 2

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Introduction

The shared faith of a religious community provides the basis for a certain degree of unity among its members. At the same time, it also makes clear which people do not belong to this group. Almost every religion has developed a certain doctrine of how to treat those who are not part of their group. The need for such a doctrine becomes especially urgent when the religious group is the minority within a society and has to live in harmony with the authorities who do not share the same faith. Shall the believers accept these authorities or rebel against them — even if they are more powerful? In which aspects is assimilation allowed — in which not? The scriptures of the New Testament provide a diverse answer to the question of how a small group of Christian believers in the middle of the non-Christian Roman society should conduct towards authorities such as governors or the Roman emperor himself. For the Book of Revelation, the Roman emperor is a beast with seven heads (cp. Rev 13:1; 17:9) which most likely represents the seven emperors who had reigned until the Book of Revelation was written. The only possible reaction to this beast and its power is uncompromising resistance until death. Jesus himself spreads, according to the gospel of Mark, a more moderate teaching and encourages people to pay taxes: “Give the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mk 12:17). An even more positive attitude is to be found in 1 Tim 2:1–2. The Christians are asked to pray for “everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions”. Probably the most positive doctrine concerning the power of a non-Christian authority we find in 1 Pet 2:13–17 and especially

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in Romans 13:1–7¹. In the later history, Christian authors primarily used the texts from the New Testament with a positive attitude towards the non-Christian authority.

Thus, it seems appropriate for the purpose of this paper that we confine our examination to Rom 13:1–7 and 1 Pet 2:11–17. By exploring the arguments of both passages of the New Testament, we will try to answer the question of how a Christian author legitimates the submission of Christians to non-Christian authorities.

The two passages

Romans 13:1–7

1 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; 4 for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. 6 For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. 7 Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

1 Peter 2:11–17

11 Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. 12 Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge. 13 For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, 14 or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. 16 As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. 17 Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor².

1 Cp. also: Tit 3:1.

2 The New Testament text is taken from: Harold W. Attridge, ed., *The Harper Collins Study Bible. New Revised Standard Version* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006).

Presentation of the arguments

Before we can examine the reasoning behind the Christian submission to the Roman authority in detail, we have to determine the addressees of Rom 13 and 1 Peter 2 and the concrete form of the submission. Rom 13:1 makes clear that the following passage addresses every soul (πᾶσα ψυχὴ)³ whereas 1 Pet 2:13 clarifies that the author solely speaks to Christians. Rom 13 and 1 Pet 2 demand from their readers to submit to the authority (ὑποτασσέσθω — Rom 13:1; ὑποτάγητε — 1 Pet 2:13). In addition to that, Paul demands from his readers to respect (φόβος) those to whom respect is due and to honor (τιμὴ) those to whom honor is due (13:7). Normally, a Christian honors other people and fears God but in this verse, this is not clearly articulated. 1 Pet 2:17 has a clear hierarchy: Honor (τιμάω) for everyone (including the emperor), love (ἀγαπάω) for the family of Christian believers and fear (φοβέομαι) only for God⁴.

In both passages, we find a quite practical argument for the submission to the Roman authority. A closer look shows us that these practical arguments differ from each other in certain aspects. Paul's motive for the submission is simply to avoid punishment (13:5). This presupposes that — under normal circumstances — the Roman state punishes the criminals and rewards the honest citizens. At this point, it would not be fair to allege that Paul's attitude is too idealistic towards authorities⁵. Paul himself fled from King Aretas in Damascus⁶. In addition to that, he urges the Corinthians to make no use of civil judges to resolve legal disputes⁷. Such problems should be solved within the Christian community. These examples make clear that Paul is well aware of the fact that various authorities do not always punish criminals and reward honest citizens. Nonetheless, the apostle remains faithful to the conviction that, in principal, the civil authority fulfills its duty. The Apostle wants to cultivate a principally positive attitude towards the Roman authority in the minds of his readers. Christians only need to be afraid of the authority when they have done something bad (cp. Rom 13:3–4). 1 Pet 2:15 also provides a very practical yet different reason for the submission to the civil authority: “By doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish” (2:15). It seems that the social living conditions of Christians in Asia Minor (to whom 1 Pet is written) by the end of the first

3 πᾶσα ψυχὴ is the LXX-Version of kâl- nepēš]. E.g. “every living creature” in Gen 9:10.

4 Fear is the typical reaction in both the Old and New Testament when the human being becomes aware of the divine presence.

5 Cp. Robert Stein, “The Argument of Romans 13:1–7,” *Novum Testamentum* 31 (1989): 334.

6 Cp.: 1 Cor 11:32–33.

7 Cp.: 1 Cor 6:1–11.

century became worse than those of the Roman community about 40 years before. Approximately twenty years after 1 Pet, Pliny the Younger wrote to the emperor Trajan that the Christians possess a “contumacious ... and inflexible obstinacy”⁸ and follow an “absurd and extravagant superstition”⁹. By submitting to the authority and by doing what is good, Christians shall try to convince other people of the Christians’ integrity as citizens and stop the defamation¹⁰.

Both passages also provide a theological justification to obey the government but, again, the exact line of this reasoning shows notable differences. The Letter to the Romans clearly states that every authority in this world is God’s servant (13:4 — θεοῦ διάκονός; 13:6 — λειτουργοὶ θεοῦ); it is instituted and appointed by him (13:1–2)¹¹. It punishes the wrongdoer, rewards the honest people (13:3–4) and also collects taxes (13:6). Here, Paul stands in the Jewish tradition¹². Isaiah 45:1 claims that God sent Cyrus to bring the Jewish people home from the Babylonian exile. Josephus as well claims that “no one obtains the government without God’s assistance”¹³. The First Letter of Peter speaks about the authority as a merely human institution (2:13 — ἀνθρώπινη κτίσις). The authority is neither seen as a servant of God nor is it presented as part of a divine plan. Civil authorities “punish those who do wrong and praise [...] those who do right” (2:14) but there is no connection between this administration of justice and God’s will. Paying taxes as part of a divine plan is not mentioned at all in 1 Pet. But for 1 Pet, the submission to the merely human Roman authority is “for the Lord’s sake” (2:13 — διὰ τὸν κύριον). In connection with 2:12, “for the Lord’s sake” can be interpreted that by submitting to the Roman authority the Christians glorify God since they promote their faith among the gentiles¹⁴. In the light of 2:21 “for the Lord’s sake” can also mean that Christians shall submit to the government

8 “pertinaciam certe et inflexibilem obstinationem debere puniri”. Plin.Ep. X, 96:3. (William Melmoth, trans.)

9 “Nihil aliud inveni quam superstitionem pravamet immodicam”. Plin.Ep. X, 96:8.

10 Cp.: John Elliot, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 494–495. Cp.: Reinhard Feldmeier, *Der erste Brief des Petrus* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2005), 108.

11 At the same time Rom 1:25 condemns the worship (λατρεύω) of creation instead of the creator. Which would forbid the adoration of the Roman emperor as “Lord and God”. This is not a contradiction to Rom 13:1–7 because it makes a difference if somebody is called “God” or “God’s servant”. Cp.: Klaus Haaker, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012), 322.

12 Cp.: Simon Lagasse, “Paul et César. Romans 13,1–7. Essai de synthèse,” *Revue Biblique* 101 (1994): 524–527. Cp.: Eduard Lohse, *Der Brief an die Römer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 353–354.

13 Joseph. BJ. 2:140. “οὐ γὰρ δίχα θεοῦ περιγενέσθαι τινὶ τὸ ἄρχειν” (Benedikt Niese, ed.)

14 Cp.: Elliot, *1 Peter*, 490.

“because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps”¹⁵. Since Jesus was innocently condemned, 1 Pet indicates that the Roman government is an unjust authority. Regardless of how the term “for the Lord’s sake” is interpreted in detail, it defines that the submission to the Roman authority is God’s will. Thus, even though in 1 Pet the Roman authority is not seen as God’s servant, the demand for the submission to the authority is not weaker than in Rom 13.

It is likely but not explicitly said in Rom 13 that Paul might also have other practical reasons, which would come quite close to those in 1 Pet 2. By living in accordance with the public authority and by showing a good conduct, Christians get rewarded by the Roman government (Rom 13:3). Such good behavior increases the likelihood that the Christian faith becomes interesting for others. Paul might have missionary considerations in mind when he wrote Rom 13¹⁶. 1 Pet 2:15 obviously does not merely have the intention to stop the defamation but also to promote mission: “Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that ... they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge” (1 Pet 2:12)¹⁷. Furthermore, it is likely that the authors of both passages were merely looking for a strategy that allows the Christian communities in Rome and Asia Minor to survive. For a small group of believers, in face of one of the most powerful governments of ancient times, there is nothing left to do than to yield to the force. Later, after 313 AD when the tide has turned, Christians dispatched their strategy of submission and tried to change the Roman society step by step. This might be true but interpreting passages from the New Testament in the light of historic events of the 4th century is an indubitably anachronistic method. Considering the scriptures as such, we should be cautious to emphasize the thesis of opportunistic Christians too much.

Analysis

Keeping the main arguments of both Christian authors for the submission to the Roman authority in mind, these demands can now be analyzed in terms of time and place in which they were presented. There seems to be a congruence of Christian and non-Christian values in different respects.

It is not surprising that both passages ascribe a moral competence to Christians. The urge to show good behavior and perform honorable deeds (Rom 13:3; 1 Pet 2:12.15) implies that Christians know how to do that. A

15 Cp.: Feldmeier, *Der erste Brief des Petrus*, 106.

16 Cp.: Haaker, *Der Brief des Apostels Paulus an die Römer*, 321.

17 Cp. also: 1 Pet 3:16.

possibly more surprising observation is that both passages also attribute a moral competence to non-Christians¹⁸. The demand in Rom 13:3–4 and 1 Pet 2:15 that the Christians ought to behave well in order to avoid punishment (Rom 13) or to stop the defamation (1 Pet 2) would not make sense, if the non-Christians would not have a basic moral competence which enables them to recognize such behavior as good conduct. Furthermore, the Roman government would not be able to reward honest citizens and to punish evil-doers without a certain knowledge of good and bad. Thus, both passages state a basic moral competence of all people which enables them to act morally right and also to recognize such behavior among other people.

Another aspect on which Rom 13, 1 Pet 2 and the pagan literature agree is the duty of authority to impose order within a society. According to Paul, the authority fulfills this task by punishing the wrongdoer and rewarding the honest people (Rom 13:3–4). Similarly, yet in a way more reserved, 1 Pet 2:14 notices that the governors are sent by the emperor to “punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right”. This is a mainly descriptive statement — it does not claim that the authority has the duty to ensure order. However, the words “wrong” and “right” signalize a restrained sympathy for the actual performance of the authority. In ancient pagan literature, it is a widespread conviction that the authority has the duty to reward honest citizens and to punish the bad ones¹⁹. Thus, the pagan, the Pauline and the Petrine teachings regarding authority are congruent in important aspects. Cancik even calls Rom 13:1–7 the mirrors for subjects as the counterpart to Seneca’s mirrors for princes (Of Clemency)²⁰.

Paul states in Rom 13:5 that it is necessary to submit to the Roman authority not only in order to avoid punishment but also because of conscience (συνείδησις)²¹. The submission shall be the consequence of an inner feeling of obligation. Here, most likely, the fact that the authority is God’s servant (13:4) shall lead to such obligation by conscience. In the Corpus Paulinum, the term συνείδησις is used 14 times²². One of most instructive uses appears in Rom 2:15: The gentiles “show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience (συνείδησις) also bears witness”.

18 Cp.: Elliot, *1 Peter*, 493–494. Cp.: Feldmeier, *Der erste Brief des Petrus*, 108.

19 Cp.: Willem C. van Unnik, “Lob und Strafe durch die Obrigkeit; Hellenistisches zu Röm 13,3–4,” in *Jesus und Paulus*, ed. Edward Earl Ellis et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 336–340.

20 Cp.: Hubert Cancik, “Alle Gewalt ist von Gott”; Römer 13 im Rahmen antiker und neuzeitlicher Staatslehren”, in *Staat und Religion*, ed. Burkhard Gladigow (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1981), 55.59.

21 This term stems from popular Hellenistic philosophy. Cp.: Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Die sittliche Botschaft des Neuen Testaments; Vol. 2* (Freiburg: Herder, 1988), 48–58. Cp.: Hans-Jürgen Eckstein, *Der Begriff Syneidesis bei Paulus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983).

22 Rom 2:15; 9:1; 15:5; 1 Cor 8:7.10.12; 10:25.27.28.29.29; 2 Cor 1:12; 4:2; 5:11.

Also non-Christians have the feeling of obligation to a certain norm. It is no “autonomous medium of norms or revelation but it should be neither seen as completely independent from norms”²³. 1 Pet uses the term *συνείδησις* three times²⁴. In 2:19, it is pointed out that Christians who are aware of God (*διὰ συνείδησιν θεοῦ*) can endure unjust suffering. This awareness equals “sensitivity to the divine will”²⁵. Also the term “good conscience” in 3:21 can be understood as sensitiveness to the will of God. In contrast to Paul, 1 Pet does not explicitly say that pagans possess conscience. In Roman literature itself, conscience is a widespread term with a variety of meanings²⁶. *Conscientia* is most commonly understood as a moral instance that judges the human behavior according to certain norms²⁷. Seneca (4 BC — 65 AD) for example has an understanding of conscience that comes quite close to Paul’s conception:

A good conscience welcomes the crowd, but a bad conscience, even in solitude, is disturbed and troubled. If your deeds are honourable, let everybody know them; if base, what matters it that no one knows them, as long as you yourself know them? How wretched you are if you despise such a witness!²⁸

Similarly, Quintilian (35 — 100) points out that conscience equals 1000 witnesses²⁹. These Roman authors understand conscience as “*testis, observator et custos*”³⁰. Such understanding shows striking similarities to the concept pointed out in Rom 2:15 where the conscience of the pagans bears witness (*συμμαρτυρέω*) to their behavior. Paul and contemporary Roman authors have therefore important overlap in their understanding of conscience. In addition to that, it seems fair to interpret the term conscience in 1 Pet 2:19 also as a witness and observer of human deeds.

A last area in which both Christian and non-Christian authors show notable similarities is their theological background. As we have seen, Paul declares authority as God’s servant and its dual function (rewarding and punishing) in accordance with the divine will whereas 1 Pet claims that the submission to the authority corresponds with the will of God. The idea of authority as part of a divine plan also appears among Roman authors. In Seneca’s “Of Clemency” the emperor Nero asks: “Have I of all mankind

23 Eckstein, *Der Begriff Syneidesis bei Paulus*, 163.

24 1 Pet 2:19; 3:16.21.

25 Elliot, *1 Peter*, 519.

26 Cp. the chart in: Eckstein, *Der Begriff Syneidesis bei Paulus*, 12.

27 Cp.: Eckstein, *Der Begriff Syneidesis bei Paulus*, 80.

28 Sen. ep. 43:5 “Si honesta sunt quae facis, omnes sciant, si turpia, quid refert neminem scire, cum tu scias? O te miserum, si contemnis hunc testem!” (Richard M. Gummere, trans.)

29 Cp.: Quint. Inst. 5:11:41. (Harold E. Butler, trans.)

30 Eckstein, *Der Begriff Syneidesis bei Paulus*, 92.

been chosen and thought fit to perform the office of a god upon earth?”³¹ This can be interpreted that Nero is the earthly representative of the gods, although, it already has a certain proximity to the idea that the emperor is a god on earth³². Half a century later, in the Histories of Tacitus (60–120) the emperor Galba claims about himself to be “called to the throne by the unanimous consent of gods and men”³³. The mere fact that both Christian and non-Christian authors provide a theological legitimation does not necessarily entail a substantial congruence in this area since both theological backgrounds differ significantly. Roman authors would not have accepted that the Christian God legitimates authority whereas Christian writers would never have agreed upon the claim that the Roman gods appointed authority in this world. Three different models for the legitimation of power have to be distinguished: (1) Rom 13 sees authority as God’s servant, (2) 1 Pet 2 claims only the submission to it as divinely sanctioned and (3) contemporary Roman authors see authority as appointed by the gods. Surprisingly, these different ways of legitimating authority entail a very similar human conduct. In effect, they all argue for the submission to the authority.

Dealing with differing ways of legitimation

It is illuminating how Paul handles such different believes and value systems that lead to a similar conduct. The Apostle, from time to time, shows keener interest in the human conduct than in the legitimation for it.

”When gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively (φύσει) what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness”³⁴.

Based on the conduct of the gentiles, Paul draws various conclusions: (1) The gentiles do instinctively what the law requires. However, not too much meaning should be attached to the term φύσει as the chief witness for natural law in Paul³⁵ because he uses it in “an extraordinarily colorless manner”³⁶.

31 Sen. clem. 1:1:2. “Egone ex omnibus mortalibus placui electusque sum, qui in terris deorum uice fungerer?”

32 Cp.: Stefan Krauter, *Studien zu Röm 13,1–7* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 60–71.

33 Tac. hist. 1:15 “deorum hominumque consensu ad imperium vocatum” (Alfred J. Church and William J. Brodribb, trans.). Cp.: Krauter, *Studien zu Röm 13,1–7*, 186–188.

34 Rom 2:14–15.

35 Cp.: Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer; Vol.1* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2014), 184–185.

36 Ernst Käsemann, *An die Römer* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1980), 59.

Thus, it should be translated with “by themselves” or “innately”³⁷. (2) Gentiles are a law to themselves. In spite of not knowing the Torah, they still live in accordance with it because their own law is in accordance with the Torah. (3) The requirements of the Torah are written on the hearts of the gentiles. Even though it is clear that they do not possess the Torah, they have something analogous to it. Paul does not say anything more about the (divine?) author of this gentile law. The Apostle appreciates a conduct that comes close to a Judeo-Christian one even if such behavior is the result of a completely other way of legitimation. He probably intentionally does not say *who* has written the requirements of the law on the hearts of the gentiles. If he did, he would have come to the conclusion that the gentiles only think that they are following their own law but in reality God secretly writes his law on their hearts. In general, Paul appreciates values and beliefs that are integrable in his own Judeo-Christian belief system. In Phil 4:8 he urges his readers to appreciate basic pagan norms: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things”. On the other hand, some pagan convictions cannot be integrated into Paul’s belief system, such as worshipping the Roman emperor as God³⁸. Nevertheless, for a Christian writer, it is a remarkably inclusive approach towards non-Christian values.

1 Pet shows a more reserved approach. In 2:9 it is stated that the Christians are “a holy nation” and “God’s own people”. Here, a clear distinction between Christians and non-Christians becomes visible. Unlike Paul, 1 Pet does not say anywhere that the submission to the authority is just and necessary. It could be just as well as completely unjust towards Christians but for the Lord’s sake and following Jesus’ example who also suffered innocently, Christians submit. The fact that the Roman authors provide a different way of theological reasoning for the submission is not really addressed by 1 Pet.

Conclusion

Rom 13:1–7 and 1 Pet 2:11–17 are one of the most important passages in the New Testament dealing with the Roman authority. Both passages urge their readers to submit to the Roman government by giving practical and theological justifications. By contrasting the two passages with the contemporary Roman literature, we have seen that there is a substantial overlap concerning the moral competence, the order in a society, the understanding

37 Cp.: Ernst Käsemann, *An die Römer*, 59.

38 Cp.: Rom 1:23.

of conscience and partially even the theological background. We have to bear in mind that an overlap merely means that some branches of the two discussed New Testament authors are similar to certain passages of contemporary Roman authors. There are of course other understandings in Paul and 1 Pet which do not meet with those in Seneca, Quintilian and other authors and vice versa. Both Christian authors appreciate non-Christian ideas (e.g. conscience; authority as warrantor for order) as long as they are integrable into their own belief system. If the pagans behave like the Christians, Paul appreciates this conduct even if it is the result of a different value system. In the 50ies, it was possible for Paul to see the Roman government as God's servant. In the 90ies, when the situation for Christians in the Roman Empire deteriorated, the author of 1 Pet reluctantly appreciated the Roman authorities for maintaining order. Since there are passages in the New Testament which pull the Roman government to pieces (e.g. Rev 13;17), both Rom 13 and 1 Pet 2 are remarkable texts which try to adapt to the pagan Roman society without giving up their own Judeo-Christian belief.

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Abstract

THE CHRISTIAN LEGITIMATION OF NON-CHRISTIAN POWER IN ROMANS 13 AND 1 PETER 2

Rom 13 and 1 Pet 2 deal with the question of how a Christian shall behave towards the non-Christian Roman authority. Both texts have a remarkably positive attitude towards the Roman government and provide practical and theological arguments in order to convince their readers to submit to the authorities. To a certain extent, Christians and non-Christians share certain values. 1 Pet 2 and even more Rom 13 appreciate these values (basic moral competence, conscience, idea of order) as long as they do not contradict the Judeo-Christian belief.

KEY WORDS: 1 Pet 2; authority; legitimation of power; legitimization of power; New Testament; Paul; power; Rom 13; submission

