

The Bible and the Public Arena: A Pauline Model for Christian Engagement in Society with Reference to Romans 13

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Abstract

In a context in which the significance of Scripture for everyday life is fading away, this article is an argument for the centrality of the Bible as the basis for a holistic understanding of reality and for an authentic Christian engagement in contemporary society. The argument is built on a twofold truth: the lordship of Christ over reality in its entirety and the public nature of the Gospel. More specifically, the paper offers an examination of Romans 13 with regard to the issue of the Christian relationship to the governing authorities. It argues that Paul offers solid theological ground on which he simultaneously legitimizes and limits the authority of the government, and presents an active and positive involvement of the Christian in the world, advocating practices that are conducive to a meaningful and peaceful life in the society at large. It concludes that according to Paul's vision of redemption, the church, as the paradigmatic community of the new creation, is called to be actively engaged in society, to have a constructive, even if critical at times, relationship to the powers and structures of authority, confessing and witnessing the lordship of Christ over reality in its entirety, in the anticipation of the ultimate redemption of God's creation.

Key words: *integration, lordship of Christ, gospel, authorities, social engagement, Romans 13*

Introduction

For thousands of years, the Bible has exercised its lasting power to address, in fresh and new ways, again and again, people in all walks of life, in all contexts. The Judeo-Christian heritage, fundamentally rooted in the biblical witness, has been the foundation of much of the European and, indeed, the entire Western civilization. However, in the contemporary world, the Christian heritage is disappearing and the place and significance of the Bible is fading away. It is in such a context that, as Gospel-centered believers, it is crucially important to attempt to bring back the centrality of the Bible and of biblical thinking as a solid and significant basis, not simply for living as Christians in the world, but also for the life of contemporary culture and society. There is, thus, a great need to re-discover, to re-interpret, to read afresh the Bible in such a way that it speaks to all aspects of life, as, in fact, it does! I, therefore, applaud the decision of the editors of *Kairos* to have an entire issue dedicated to the essential issue of “The Bible in Everyday Life”; this illustrates their commitment to promote the centrality of the Bible and a responsible, constructive, biblical interpretation done, not in an exclusivist and abstract biblical scholarship, but in such a way as to address, in a relevant way, the issues of everyday life, and offer an alternative to the challenges and modes of life in contemporary societies.

In this article, I would like to offer a few reflections on the public nature of the gospel as it is rooted in the lordship of Christ over reality in its entirety and expressed in the biblical witness. Particularly given the focus of the journal on “The Bible in Everyday Life,” I will concentrate on a particular question, namely the way in which a Christian should relate to the governing authorities. This has been a question of great interest for the church of every generation. Since the earthly powers and authorities are God’s instruments, are Christians supposed to simply and unquestionably submit to them? Should a Christian have a stance of indifference and disengagement toward the authorities, or should one opt for a constructive, critical engagement in the life of the city? Since Christians have always had both an earthly and a heavenly citizenship, how are they to relate to the surrounding culture and society in a way that is true and authentic to both citizenships? In what follows, I will attempt to tackle such questions. In order for my tentative answers to be placed in a larger, appropriate context, I will begin with a brief description of the contemporary search for integration and a holistic vision of life followed by a preliminary note on Paul and the social dimension of the gospel. In the third and major part of the article, I will investigate the Pauline understanding of the Christian relation to the state based on an examination of Romans 13. It is my hope that this investigation will shed some light on this important aspect of our everyday life.

The Search for Integration: A Holistic Understanding of Christian Life and Mission

Nowadays, there is a great cry for help, especially expressed by young people in their desperate search for integration, which is how to make sense of and integrate their faith within the everyday realities of life in their society. They pose some very serious and urgent questions: is faith just for private, or does it also have to do with the public arena? What is the relationship between Christian witness and the professional field? Is there a place for Christian witness in a secular environment, and if yes, how is that witness to be displayed with integrity in such a context? What is the relationship between faith and the reality of one's professional life? Is there a difference between a Christian and a non-Christian working in the same profession? What is the impact of faith on everyday life; how do faith and works integrate, and what difference does my faith make for my work? What does it mean to be an authentic Christian in a secular and pluralist context?

Fundamental for any attempt to answer these crucial questions is the double truth of the lordship of Christ over all of reality and, consequently, the gospel being a public truth. As we explore the dynamic between our Christian faith and public life, it is mandatory that we make a serious effort towards integration because this is *required* by the lordship of Christ over all creation, in all matters private and public. This is excellently illustrated in the life and writings of Abraham Kuyper, a Dutch theologian, politician, journalist, university founder, and seminal thinker in the history of Reformed Christianity. In his inaugural speech (“Sphere Sovereignty”) at the opening of the Free University of Amsterdam which he founded in 1880, Kuyper expresses this in remarkable and unforgettable words:

Oh, no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: “*Mine!*”

As Bible teachers and educators, we make it our task to inspire a new generation of believers, and especially Christian professionals, to pursue a holistic vision of the Kingdom of God with all intellectual seriousness. We should make it our goal to equip all Christians with a holistic understanding of reality, to prepare them to engage deeply with God's world, with all aspects of cultures and societies. It is time for churches to have a constant preoccupation with making the lordship of Christ come to bear on every single aspect of our lives. One of our major efforts in Christian education and mission is to equip and discipline young men and women to be able to “take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ,” that is, to allow the lordship of Christ over the entire reality: over their own personal

life, over the surrounding environment, over culture, over society, over education, over politics, over economics, over religion (!). The gospel was never merely a matter of private interest; it is not and should never be reduced to a means of getting souls into heaven, or restricted to the individual inner soul! The gospel was always, and it should remain, a public truth, a statement about the whole of reality: about God, about the world, about meaning, about life.

This very issue of “The Bible in Everyday Life” is an effort in our much-needed and meaningful search for the authentic integration of faith and life. Our passion for God cannot be separated from God’s reality and His passion for the world, but must encompass it. This is even true as we desire to be responsible citizens of the new Europe we all want to build.

But a *new* Europe should be built on *new* foundations. The entire history of modernity teaches us this lesson! We have excluded God from our universe, and for centuries we have marched within “the limits of pure reason.” Where are we now? We are in a world full of confused, desperate, hopeless, and divided people; it is a world of ideologies, bloody conflicts, selfishness, and excessive materialism – a rift of moral decadence. A new Europe should revive God in its consciousness. But this should be neither a God limited by an individualistic, selfish perception, nor a God interested in a spirituality which emphasizes only the unseen dimension of human beings. No! Rather, we must revive the God of the whole reality, the Creator of all things – and therefore, the God of all peoples. It is only this God, Christ incarnated, who lived among us, died for all, and was raised from the dead, who offers hope for our future. Only He can help us, through the power of the Spirit and through His Word, to recapture the joy, fulfillment, and innocence of a humanity created in God’s image. Confronting the world with the Word of God, and promoting what is good and right, what enriches us in art, science, culture, and society, we will urge our communities towards a new understanding of what is true, worthy of praise, pure, just, and worthy to be loved. This is what it means to live out the fact that the gospel is public truth. And this makes our task of relating the Bible to everyday life even more important and urgent.

Paul and the Social Dimension of the Gospel

Before I go into an examination of the way in which Paul understands and presents a dynamic of Christian relationship to the governing authorities, it is useful to make a few preliminary remarks regarding the general social and political context of Paul and his understanding and relation to it. It was often believed that Paul was not concerned with the social and political realities of the world, but rather with solely preaching the gospel of salvation. Further, the claim goes, Paul expected the imminent end of the world and so he did not care much

about what happened with the wider world. Research in this area has shown, however, that this is not an accurate view of Paul, as the following remarks will indicate.¹

Far from having an escapist mentality, Paul's creational theology, i.e., his understanding of God's relation to, and sovereignty over creation, over nations and over history and the way this reality was irreversibly affected by God's intervention in Christ, gave him a positive view of the world and of the place and role of the larger structures of society. Furthermore, the way he formulated his gospel shows that Paul was well acquainted with the religious, cultural, social, and political matrix of the Greco-Roman world with which he was thoroughly engaged. So, within this larger framework of reference, it is plausible, indeed necessary, to inquire about the social meaning of his theological statements since his theology, like much of the theological discourse of the NT, was meant not simply to offer salvation in a narrow, spiritual sense, but also to affect moral dispositions, to shape particular communities, to determine specific behavior and a particular way of being in and for the world.

Paul's writings have not been generally used as a resource for dealing with contemporary social and political issues. It is often assumed that although the earthly life and ministry of Jesus was dominated by his concern for the poor and the oppressed, Paul, on the other hand, transformed Jesus' original message and intention into a purely spiritual religion – a message of eternal salvation for sinners. Paul, it is argued, had little, if any, interest in the affairs of "this world." There are many reasons for this individualistic, narrowly religious and spiritual reading of Paul. But, for sure, one important reason for this (mis)reading of Paul is due rather to his interpreters than to his own writings. Interpreters were unable to see any concern for the "secular" matters in the letters of Paul because they operated with a modern presupposition of a dichotomy between "sacred" and "profane" aspects of reality. However, for Paul and all first century Christians, there was *one realm of reality* in which body and soul, religion and politics, private and public, individual and social aspects of reality were intermingled in a complex unified vision of life. It was primarily by our own presuppositional "assignment" of Paul to the "sacred" or "spiritual/religious" realm that we were unable to perceive him as being interested in social and political issues as well. Once we become aware of the unified worldview of Paul and attempt to read him on his own terms, we may discover a new facet of Paul.

1 For a fuller and more comprehensive discussion of what follows, see the chapter "From Creation to New Creation: The Underlying Framework of Paul's Understanding of Reconciliation," in Corneliu Constantineanu, *The Social Significance of Reconciliation in Paul's Theology. Narrative Readings in Romans* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 43-61.

The significant contribution of the sociology of knowledge to the study of the NT has drawn attention to the fact that the documents of the NT give strong evidence to the complex interrelationships that exist between gospel and culture, and between church and society. Philip Esler, for example, correctly points out that the writings of the NT reveal “a pervasive relationship between *kerygma* and context, that is, between the religious affirmations of the early Christian communities and the social realities which affected them” (1994:ix). Thus, for a proper understanding and interpretation of much of the NT texts, one has to make a thorough analysis of the context, of the social realities within which the authors were writing and the social dimensions of their human existence as a whole (Scroggs, 1996:255-261). Addressing the issues of Paul’s ethics in practice, James Dunn also remarks that Paul’s concern was not solely with personal issues, but rather “his concern at every turn was with social interaction.” He continues:

In asking how Paul’s ethical principles worked in practice, therefore, it is important to recall the reality of Paul’s social world and that/those of his churches. ... The interface between the churches and their social context, the movement across the boundaries (out and in), and the tensions within the churches themselves are all factors to be borne in mind when talking about Paul’s ethics in practice (1998:672-673).

Similarly, Wayne Meeks (1993) argues persuasively that the “new kind of morality” that Christians manifested had profound social implications. This not only marked them out from the multiplicity of sects and religious movements of the first century, but also contributed substantially to their becoming, in the subsequent centuries, a dominant political and cultural force in the Roman Empire. The same author reminds us that the ultimate concern of the writings of the NT was to determine a particular way of life for their recipients, especially at the community level. And this new morality that the gospel affects is an integral part of the larger context within which the community lives, i.e., its culture.

Another significant issue for our discussion is the fact that there is a *social dimension of beliefs*. This is more than simply social “implications” of the gospel. There is a close and direct link between social factors and the formation of beliefs. Given the diverse social and religious backgrounds of Christians before their conversion, it follows that many beliefs get constructed in various ways by the believers which potentially lead to different social implications of a particular belief (Meeks, 1982:275). More fundamentally, the very explication of the meaning of a particular belief is a complex process in which the social world of the believers plays a major role. Meeks points out the dialectical process in which the meaning of a particular belief is shaped, and he rightly emphasizes that the social dimension of belief is an integral part of its meaning: “What we may crudely call its social consequences were an integral part of that process”

(1982:275). If “the force of a belief-statement is determined by the whole matrix of social patterns within which it is uttered” (Meeks, 1983:164), the neglect of the social context in Pauline studies leads inevitably to distortions of doctrine.

Further, in the writings of Paul, there is an *ambivalence and a dialectical relationship of Christians to the world*. Paul’s language of “belonging” and “separation” offers a view into the way in which the identity of those who “belong to Christ” was maintained and positioned vis-à-vis the outside world. There is ambivalence and a dialectical relationship manifested by the first Christians with regard to “the world” (Meeks, 1983:85-107; 1993:61-65). On the one hand, the insider/outsider terminology implies a negative perception of society and the “qualitative difference” between outsiders and insiders. On the other hand, however, Christians are not to withdraw from society. As a diaspora Jew himself, Paul knew that despite the various purity codes and boundary markers that differentiated the Jewish communities from the larger society, the Jews did relate in various ways to the wider society in which they lived.² Now, as an apostle to the Gentiles, Paul encouraged his congregations not only to continue to participate, as good citizens, in the life of the city, but also to behave in a manner that would bring approval from outsiders. Thus, for example, the strong work ethic of the believers in Thessalonians was intended to “earn the respect of outsiders” (1 Th 4:12), while the exercise of the spiritual gifts in the Corinthian congregation were to be amended so as not to give the wrong impression to outsiders (1 Co 14:23).

It is important that we have a good grasp of this dialectical relationship of early Christianity to the world. Far too many times in the history of Christianity and of scholarship, Paul was easily categorized as either an “antagonist” to the larger society around him, or a “conformist”. This was done by unilaterally taking just some of his explicit statements and then forming definite conclusions based on them. But to treat Paul in this way is misleading and might lead to further distortions of his theology. Paul did not have a uniform, either-or position vis-à-vis the world, rather he showed a more complex dialectical view. His attitude to the state is such an example. As we will see in our analysis of Romans 13, Paul clearly and unambiguously refuses to conform to its expectations and demands – for example, to conform to the emperor cult. At the same time, however, Paul legitimizes the state as “God’s servant for good” (Ro 13:4) without blindly and unquestionably accepting its authority. We find similar tensions in Paul’s view of slaves and women. On the one hand, “in Christ” there was no difference anymore – all were equal (Gal 3:28). On the other hand, slaves were still to submit to their masters, and fulfill their duties even better than before, while

2 John M.G. Barclay has documented this aspect in his book *The Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).

women were exhorted to be submissive. We can surely say that the attitude and relation of early Christians to the outside world was complex and it should be given careful consideration. The tension should not be removed: the world is God's good creation and yet is now in a present state of corruption, and the "god of this world" is active in it; Christians are "resident aliens" in this world and have their "citizenship in heaven" (Php 3:20), and yet they are encouraged neither to withdraw from the world (1 Co 5:10) nor to totally deny or reject its realities and values. In fact, it is precisely because of their new identity and status that they are able to work towards the transformation of this world.

1 Thessalonians, one of Paul's earliest letters, is an excellent example of how Paul was, from the very beginning of his ministry, concerned with both the internal cohesion and growth of the Christians communities, and with the Thessalonians' social conduct and positive attitude and behavior towards outsiders. It was of the greatest importance to Paul that Christians should not "repay evil for evil but always seek to do good to one another and *to all*" (1 Th 5:15); that they should "increase and abound in love for one another and *for all*" (1 Th 3:12); that they should "aspire to live quietly, to mind [their] own affairs, and to work with [their] hands... so that [they] *may behave properly toward outsiders*" (1 Th 4:11-12). Whether or not Paul was influenced by, or in conversations with the philosophical teachings of the day,³ it is clear that while his primary interest was with the internal dynamics of the Christian community, he was nevertheless very much interested in the Christians' relationship to the larger society and wanted them to act as responsible members within it.

Conventional interpretations of Paul have generally either evaded political and social issues in Paul's theology, or understood him as simply endorsing the existing political powers in a conservative attitude of maintaining the social and political status quo. Several recent trends in Pauline studies, however, seem to challenge this view and to argue instead that Paul was more profoundly political than is usually perceived, and that the gospel he preached had significant social and political dimensions.⁴ It is true that the extent of such concerns and the basic

3 Abraham J. Malherbe (1987:95-107) argues that in order for Paul to be relevant and intelligible in that context, he shaped his ethical discourse using terms common to the contemporary Stoic, Cynic and Epicurean philosophical discussions of social and political conduct.

4 The most recent and significant studies include two excellent books edited by Richard Horsley *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* and *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*. There are also several very significant monographs: Bruno Blumenfeld, *The Political Paul: Justice, Democracy and Kingship in a Hellenistic Framework*; Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle*; Mark Strom, *Reframing Paul: Conversation in Grace and Community*; R. A. Horsley and M. A. Silberman, *The Message and the Kingdom*; Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by Faith from a Latin*

orientation of Paul's political thought is a matter of debate in recent scholarship, and there is a wide spectrum of views among scholars regarding Paul's attitude to and reflection on social and political issues.⁵ What is becoming clearer, however, is the fact that the gospel Paul proclaimed was not in any way detached from the everyday reality, and that it also had a political message at its heart. Further still, some studies show that the political dimension of the gospel was not secondary or accidental to Paul's writings but rather an integral and fundamental element of it. The gospel of the crucified and resurrected Christ, it is claimed, not only has a few "social and political implications", rather it is political at its core.⁶

I conclude this section with an important reminder: in order to get an accurate picture of the significance of any of Paul's doctrines, we need to set them within the larger context of the social dimensions of his communities in their environment because a neglect of the social context leads inevitably to distortions of doctrine. That is why it is mandatory to first understand the complex social and political matrix within which Paul's communities lived, and only then to attempt to sketch the contours of the meaning of a particular teaching in Paul's writing for our own everyday life in society.

The Christian and the Authorities in Romans 13

In this last part of the article, I would like to concentrate on Paul's handling of the specific and important question of how Christians are to understand and relate to the governing authorities. This is, of course, a very difficult text, and it is not my intention here to go into a full and detailed exegesis of the entire text.⁷ Also, this passage alone does not represent the entire Pauline theology of state.

American Perspective; Robert Grant, *Paul in the Roman World: the Conflict at Corinth*.

- 5 On the one hand, there are those who interpret Paul as having a basic conservative attitude (among which R. Grant, E. E. Ellis, D. Tidball, B. Blumenfeld). On the other hand, there are those who argue that Paul had a more profound political thought reflected in his letters (T. Gorringer, W. Wink, D. Georgi, N. Elliott, M. Strom, R. Horsley, N. T. Wright and others).
- 6 These are the initial findings of two research groups, one in the USA, "Paul and Political Group" led by Richard Horsley (published in the two volumes *Paul and Politics* and *Paul and Empire*), and the other in the UK, "Scripture and Hermeneutics Group" led by Craig Bartholomew, particularly the third volume, *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically*.
- 7 For a larger discussion of this topic, see the chapter "The Social Meaning of Reconciliation in Paul II: Practices of Reconciliation in Romans 12–15," in *The Social Significance of Reconciliation*, 145–183. A modified version of this material also appeared in my article on "The Christian and the Governing Authorities: An Analysis of Romans 13 in Context," in *Pleroma: Studii și Cercetări Teologice*, vol. 11, no. 1 (June 2009): 109–136.

It does, however, shed much light on this important question and shows how Paul understood and dealt with this issue in the Roman imperial context. It is, therefore, extremely relevant for our question as to how the Bible helps us relate our faith to everyday aspects of life.

Given the many difficulties and moral dilemmas these verses have raised throughout the centuries, it is not surprising that interpreters have proposed a great variety of solutions in their dealing with this text. Opinions range all the way from removing it from the canon⁸ and treating it as an interpolation of non-Pauline origin,⁹ to assigning it extremely limited or no relevance for a theology of the state considering that it is a contextual piece of instruction addressed to a very specific situation in Rome,¹⁰ and to seeing it as a general statement that applies to all governments at all times as an expression of God's desire and purpose of God for order in society (Sanday i Headlam, 1902:369ff).

I cannot, of course, go into a detailed analysis of this passage and a critical interaction with the rich history of its interpretation,¹¹ nor is it my purpose to attempt to solve its many puzzles. There are several entire monographs and numerous articles dedicated to this subject, not to mention the extended pages of interpretations in the commentaries on Romans.¹² My intention is rather to offer a possible line of interpretation of Romans 13 within the context of Romans 12-15 with particular attention to its place and meaning in the context of Paul's emphasis on the practices of reconciliation as an integral part of the gospel. The

8 This is, for example, the opinion of O'Neill (1975).

9 J. Kallas (1964-65:365-374); W. Munro (1990:161-168). Käsemann (1980:351) calls it "an alien body in Paul's exhortation," though he stresses that there are neither external nor internal reasons to doubt the authenticity of the text.

10 Among others, N. Elliott (1997:184-204). Similarly, Anthony Guerra understands this passage as a clear piece of political apologetic in response to the specific "Roman factor" (1995:160-164).

11 For excellent summaries of the history of interpretation, see Moo (1996:806-810) and Wright (2002:716-717).

12 Among monographs, we can mention Jan Botha, *Subject to Whose Authority? Multiple Readings of Romans 13* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994) and Walter E. Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors: Church and State in the New Testament* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1999). Some of the significant studies on Romans 13 are T. L. Carter, "The Irony of Romans 13;" Gerrit de Kruijf, "The Function of Romans 13 in Christian Ethics;" Neil Elliot, "Romans 13:17 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda;" N. T. Wright, "New Testament and the State"; Philip H. Towner, "Romans 13:1-7 and Paul's Missiological Perspective: A Call to Political Quietism or Transformation?"; Robert H. Stein, "The Argument of Romans 13:1-7;" J. D. G. Dunn, "Romans 13:1-7: A Charter for Political Quietism?"; Alexander Webster, "St Paul's Political Advice to the Haughty Gentile Christians in Rome: An Exegesis of Romans 13:1-7"; S. Hutchinson, "The Political Implications of Romans 13:1-7"; E. Käsemann, "Principles of the Interpretation of Romans 13."

fact that Paul places this text at the very heart of this passage (12-15)¹³ suggests that he regarded it as an essential part of his whole argument. Therefore, its meaning proceeds from its intended role in the larger context.

The first important observation we need to make is that, given the thematic and linguistic links with the surrounding context and the lack of any solid internal or external evidence for being a later addition to the text, it is clear that Romans 13 should not be treated as an interpolation, but as an integral part of Paul's argument, and thus must be interpreted in the context of Paul's larger argument in Romans 12-15. More specifically, the text in view should be interpreted in close association with the exhortation to love in 12:9-21, which, together with the similar exhortation in 13:8-10, brackets it. It is clear that Paul wants to show that the Christian commitment to love is not limited to individual relationships (within and outside the Christian community), but also includes the believers' lives as responsible citizens in the society at large. The call to be a community which does "what is noble in sight of all" and embodies the practices of reconciliation (12:9-21) means that the believers should also behave responsibly towards the governing authorities. Seen from this perspective, Paul's position vis-à-vis authorities may not appear as making "absurdly positive comments" (Elliott, 1997:196), but rather as offering "a crucial test-case of the Christians' external relations, and thus as providing a key exemplar of the instructions surrounding it" (Horrell, 2003:87).¹⁴ One of the points that Paul stresses in 12:14-21 was that when the believers experience persecution or wrongdoing, they are not to seek retaliation or private vengeance, but leave the matter of justice to God – "leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'vengeance is mine'" (12:19) – while the believers were to continue in their business of overcoming evil with good and living peaceably with all. It is in 13:1-7 that Paul spells out, at least to some extent, the way in which God does justice, even now, not only at the final judgment (1:32; 2:1-16; 14:10): it is through the governing authorities, as God's instruments, that a measure of justice is done, and order is preserved.¹⁵ Otherwise, chaos would rule and life would not be possible, a situation which would be against God's intention to maintain order in his creation, including in society. That is why the believers should not take matters into their own hands, but rather submit to the

13 James Dunn takes 13:1-7 as the center of the chiasmic structure evident in chapters 12-15. Similarly, Horrell (2003:86-87) and Wright (2002:703) regard 13:1-7, and 12:14-13:7 respectively as the centers of a similar structure in 12-13.

14 Wengst (1987:81) holds a similar position: "...relations with people outside the community... are not to be different from those within the community, despite the aggression with which they meet. As a particular case of behaviour towards such people generally, Paul considers attitudes to those holding power in the state."

15 This point is made by Wright (2002:718).

authorities whose responsibility it is to keep order and peace.

As for the structure of the argument in Romans 13:1-7, it could be schematically presented in this way (Stein, 1989:343):

- A general imperative: every person should be subject to authorities (v. 1a)
- The grounds for the command (vv. 1b-4):
 - Theological ground: authority is God's ordination (vv. 1b,c)
 - Practical ground: authorities maintain order and distribute justice (vv. 3-4)
- A summary exhortation: be subject because of God's wrath and conscience (v. 5)
- The argument from practice: authorities promote social wellbeing (v. 6)
- A specific and concluding imperative: pay to all what is due them (v. 7)

The text begins with an imperative: "*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities*" (v. 1a). It is generally accepted that the wording *pa/sa yuch.*, "every soul/person," is a strong indication that this is a general command to submit which applies to all people, grounded in Paul's broad, creational theological argument. Similarly, it is commonly understood that ἐξουσία (‘authorities,’ ‘powers,’ ‘rulers,’) refers here to the earthly rulers (since they, for example, are to collect taxes), even though Paul usually uses the term to designate both spiritual and earthly powers, sometimes simultaneously and without making a clear distinction between the two (as in 1 Co 2:6-8 and Col 2:14-15).¹⁶ What is still frequently debated among Pauline scholars is the precise meaning and extent of "submission"¹⁷ and the occasion of this imperative. From the specific issues facing the Christians in Rome to which we have referred, it is possible to understand the command to submit as Paul's pastoral attempt to deal with incipient tendencies of antinomianism among some Christians in Rome (Moulder, 1977:13-23), thus trying to minimize the risks the community faced as it was no longer protected by the same privileges the Jewish community had (Dunn, 1988), and also trying to prevent a possible Zealot type of violent rebellion against authorities and refusal to pay taxes (Wright, 2002:716ff). We know, indeed, that the Jewish

16 Wink, (1984:45-47) and Wright (2002:720-721) make a parallel between Ro 13 and Col 1:16, while Dunn (1988) states that Paul refers to earthly rulers. See also Fee (1987:103-104; 1983:87-89).

17 As illustrated by the NRV translation, some authors point to the difference between "submission/being subject to" and "blind obedience": Moo (1996:797, 807-810); Cranfield (1979:660-663); Webster (1981:269); Hutchinson (1971:53-55). Emil Brunner (1959:108), on the other hand, is representative of those who understand Romans 13 as a plea for "obedient submission." In reaction to such a position, and at the other end of the spectrum, James Moulder (1977:13-23) argues that Paul's reason for writing Romans, his political idealism and his insistence on the ethical implications of the gospel, not only undermine the thesis of absolute obedience to one's government, but in fact, it supports a conscientious disobedience.

diaspora benefitted from a privileged treatment which ensured not only their distinctive identity as the unique people of God, but also their protection. As long as the early Christian communities were identified with Judaism, or considered a branch within it, they also enjoyed that protection. However, as Dunn correctly points out, because Paul redefines the people of God in terms other than ethnic categories, the Christian communities in Rome “could therefore no longer claim the political privileges accorded to ethnic minorities. Paul must have been very conscious that by redrawing the boundaries of the people of God in non-ethnic terms he was putting the political status of the new congregations at risk” (Dunn, 1986).¹⁸ Nevertheless, as Paul’s theological ground for the appeal makes clear, the distinctive Christian identity did not alter the basic Jewish political view of life under the given political structures.

“*For there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God*” (v. 1bc). This statement seems to suggest a more general position that Paul had vis-à-vis the powers that be, and so the text should be interpreted in that light.¹⁹ It is significant to observe that the first theological reason Paul gives for submission is not Christological (that Christ conquered the powers) or eschatological (that the end is near), but creational (God’s order in creation), thus keeping in line with his Jewish theology of creation and order.²⁰ The ordering of society under government is God’s intention, and so the believers should accept that fact and be willing to actively live within such structures. Otherwise, they will be resisting “what God has appointed” (2a), and “*will incur judgment*” (2b) as a result. In keeping with his Jewish political theology, Paul understands the authority as being God-given, and consequently the government’s task is to work for the good of their citizens, having the judicial

18 An additional argument supporting the idea that Paul had a practical purpose in mind when he wrote this passage is offered by Thomas Coleman (1997:307-327). After a detailed study of the four specific terms Paul uses in Romans 13:7 (“tribute”, “tax”, “reverence” and “honor”), in the context of the Greco-Roman semantic field of political obligation, Coleman suggests that the passage should be read as Paul’s exhortation to submission in light of Nero’s increased taxation as well as his introduction of penalties for those who did not show reverence and honor to those in authority.

19 Horrell (2003:85ff) remarks that this text is relevant for constructing a broader theology of the state. This does not mean that what Paul said was not contextually relevant to the situation in Rome. However, the interpretation should not be limited strictly to that context. As Horrell correctly observes, since all the biblical documents are contextually bound, one should not choose arbitrarily which one has applicability for today; rather one should apply the same critical distancing and hermeneutical considerations to all biblical texts.

20 Several OT texts illustrate this understanding of God’s privilege and freedom to invest rulers and authorities: Jer 27:5; Prov 8:15; Dan 4:17. Josephus shows a similar understanding when he states that “no ruler attains his office save by the will of God” (*Wars*, II, 140).

authority to maintain order in society by imposing a legal restraint on any form of anti-social behavior or anarchy (Moulder, 1977:13-23). Indeed, Paul's command in Romans 13 is a call to reject any kind of anarchy and/or withdrawal from actual engagement with the concrete conditions of everyday life in society. It is probable that there were Christians who understood the lordship of Christ to mean a rejection of all human lordship and government authority. In response, Paul corrects this misunderstanding and offers the believers in Rome a framework for their Christian life in which the political powers are God's intention and therefore have divine legitimization.²¹

Having said that, however, we should point out that the statements Paul makes regarding authorities also carry several significant implications in terms of their claims, prerogatives, and responsibilities. By saying that rulers are "instituted by God" (v. 1) who "has appointed" them (v. 2a) and that they are θεοῦ διάκονος, "God's servants" (v. 4), Paul clearly implies that they are accountable to God and will be judged by him for the way they carry out their duties.²² If this is true, then Paul's statements in this passage appear to take away the prerogative of divinity from the emperor. One may thus agree with Wright that while an appeal to submit to the authorities, Romans 13 also "constitutes a severe demotion of arrogant and self-divinizing rulers," and it can be understood as "an undermining of totalitarianism, not a reinforcement of it" (Wright, 2002:719).²³ However, one

- 21 See Ziesler (1989:308-309). Unfortunately, this apparently unqualified theological basis Paul gives has been grossly misused in order to legitimize and maintain abuses of power by governments over the centuries. Elliott (1999:3-24) offers a serious critique of the ways in which this text has been used throughout the history of the church to suppress any opposition to the established political powers. Wengst (1987:84) also points out that by making plain language statements such as to say that there is no actual power except from God, and that those in authority are God's instruments, Paul unintentionally "exposes himself to the danger of providing theological legitimization for de facto power no matter how it may have come into being and how it may be used."
- 22 This was a common Jewish understanding, as can be seen from the intertestamental literature, for example in Wisdom 6:1-3. This view is also maintained by Paul, a fact which could be seen in his understanding elsewhere that everyone will come before God's judgment, particularly his "servants." However, Paul does not make this point explicit here, probably because he did not intend to offer a comprehensive view on the subject; so we should be cautious not to draw too much from it in this context. See further Wright (2002:719).
- 23 Similarly, de Kruijf (2002:233), takes this aspect as extremely relevant for the political life of the church because of its effect of "relativizing the significance of the state in the light of God's history, and limiting its task... [thus giving] every reason for critical participation in political life and constant vigilance against totalitarian tendencies such as Caesar's." As further support, he quotes from J. Chaplin, 'Government', in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, D. J. Atkinson et al. (eds.), Leicester, IVP, 1995, pp. 415-416): "The effect of declaring before Roman ears that government is a mere 'servant' is first to repudiate Roman claims to the

should not place too much emphasis on this point since Paul's most important objective was to persuade the believers in Rome that "even though they are servants of the Messiah Jesus, the world's rightful Lord, this does not give them carte blanche to ignore the temporary subordinates whose appointed task, whether they know it or not, is to bring at least a measure of God's order and justice to the world" (Wright, 2004:719). It is, in fact, in line with Paul's understanding of a ruler's appointed task that besides theological reasons, Paul also offers practical grounds for submission: rulers are God's instruments for judgment, for praising those who do good and for punishing the wrongdoers (vv. 2b-5), as well as for promoting the well-being of social order (vv. 6-7). That is why God's public servants, authorities, must receive their due: "*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*" (v. 7). Since here is the only place in his letters where Paul brings up the subject of paying taxes, this could be a possible indication of the fact that there was a specific situation of abuse regarding taxes in Rome, which might have led to potentially dangerous and widespread social unrest. Paul would want to protect the Christian community from such a risk and asks the believers to pay the tax faithfully (Dunn, 1988).

One of the difficult questions one has to consider vis-à-vis this text refers to the attitude Christians should have towards a corrupt, unjust, oppressive, and even evil government which acts in ways that are against its own people. Indeed, what about the situation in which the authorities themselves become "the persecutors"? And further still, how do we use Paul's advice in a totally different context today, where believers are both Christians and part of the government? Even though this text does not offer a direct guide to answer such questions, we may find hints regarding Paul's attitude and actions in texts such as Acts 16:19-40; 22:22-29; 23:1-5, and 25:6-12. Seen in the light of Paul's teaching in Romans, Philippians and 1 and 2 Thessalonians, when Paul himself encountered persecution from authorities, he submitted to their authority while at the same time he also reminded them of their duty. The church's mission, in light of God's redemptive purposes for the world, should be guided by a desire for peace, justice, order, and a continuous search to discern the will of God for every concrete situation. These concerns, present in Romans 13:1-7, should have primacy in shaping one's attitude toward the government rather than a blind unconditional, unqualified submission (Johnson, 2000:94).

Given Paul's experiences of hardships at the hands of Romans, his understanding of the lordship of Christ, and the widespread cult of the Emperor,

deity of the Emperor, and secondly, by bringing government under the limits of divine law, to undermine the Roman concept of absolute political sovereignty" (Kruif, 2002:334).

a further question arises from Romans 13:1-7: is Paul's perspective on the government simply positive, or are there qualifications and nuances to Paul's message of being subject to the governing authorities?²⁴ As we have mentioned, there is a tension in this text, and there is not a simple resolution to the sense of "enduring and intrinsic ambiguities of this text ... [whereby] the (Jewish) strategy Paul adopts *both* legitimates *and* limits the state's authority at one and the same time" (Horrell, 2003:88).²⁵ Ernst Käsemann concludes, in his study on Romans 13, that there is a limit of obedience to the government when it does not allow Christians to carry on their task – which is to acknowledge and authenticate the lordship of Christ in one's being and doing. He writes:

Is there any thing which might rightly be called a limit to the obedience here being demanded of the Christian and, if so, where is it to be drawn? In a nutshell my answer would be: 'Christian obedience comes to an end at the point where further service becomes impossible – and only there.' That happens incontrovertibly when the suggestion is made to the Christian that he should deny his existence as a Christian and abandon his particular Christian task (Käsemann, 1969:214).

But while Käsemann indicates the central Christian concern in the world as that of pointing to the lordship of Christ, he also correctly emphasizes that many times his lordship is manifested in hidden forms beyond our perception, or even understanding. It is worth quoting him in full:

- 24 I found it somewhat surprising that Horrell, for example, despite offering a cogent analysis of the entire section, is not able to see any reserve or qualification to Paul's advice to submit to the government. He states, "It is striking that [Paul] can speak here without any hint of reserve or irony of the state as God's servant in rewarding good and punishing evil" (2003:87). Other authors, however, understand and interpret Paul's position in a more nuanced way. Carter, for example, takes an opposite stance and argues that Paul is using irony, and that beyond the surface meaning of the discourse the readers would have been able to detect a hidden message. Here is how Carter describes his proposal: "...the original audience of the letter shared with Paul a common experience of oppression at the hands of the authorities and were aware of the abuses that took place in the opening years of Nero's reign. The consequent implausibility of Paul's language would have alerted his readers to the presence of irony. They would have been able to set aside the surface meaning of the discourse and to recognize that Paul was using the established rhetorical technique of censuring with counterfeit praise. While the passage can be read as a straightforward injunction to submit to the authorities, an ironic reading of the text results in a subversion of the very authorities it appears to commend" (Carter, 2004:209).
- 25 He further adds: "Insofar as Paul... regards rulers as there because God has given them their position, he does add a certain divine legitimization to Roman imperial rule. But equally, by insisting that it is God who has granted the rulers their role, Paul... relativizes their position: it is theirs not on the grounds of their own might or (pseudo-divine) status, but only because God has chosen to allow it to be so; and what God has granted God can equally take away" (Horrell, 2003:88).

What we have to do is to authenticate the Christ as the hidden Lord of the world in our doing and in our being. The outward form which corresponds to this content of the hidden Lord of the world may be the narrowing down and straitening of the Church's room for manoeuvre even into the compass of a prison cell or a grave. Sometimes the Lord of the world speaks more audibly out of prison cells and graves than out of the life of churches which congratulate themselves on their concordat with the State. The space his lordship occupies is not identical with our space, the fact that we are hemmed in does not annul the breadth of his word, nor does our death annul his possibilities. A place on earth for us and our institutions is not the ultimate criterion about which our deeds and omissions have to be orientated. The boundary of our service is the point at which we cease to acknowledge Christ as Lord of the world, not the point at which the hiddenness of this Lord as such is demonstrated and made sensible to us (Käsemann, 1969:215).

Thus, any effort to properly interpret this passage should consider its complexity and the multilayered distinctions and nuances Paul makes, and must avoid a rigid labeling of Paul as “*either a liberator or an oppressor, a radical critic or [a] conservative supporter of the status quo*” (Horrell, 2003:89). In doing so, we will be able to detect Paul's more complex understanding of the dynamic of the Christians' relationship with the powers that be, and to recognize his position as one of critical engagement in the life of the city (Towner, 1999). James Dunn correctly observes that Paul's use of Hellenistic administrative language and categories in this chapter reveals his concern for the churches' existence and function within the everyday social and political realities of Rome (Dunn, 1988).²⁶

“*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. All these and any other commandment... are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'*” (vv. 8-10). Paul concludes his argument about Christians' relationships with the wider world by reaffirming love as the

26 However, Dunn's opinion that Paul draws on the Jewish political wisdom accumulated and tested over years of oppression and dispersion in order “to counsel a policy of political quietism” may need to be further nuanced. Following PHEME PERKINS (1982:98), Dunn points out that Paul's use of such language indicated to his readers “that the Christian is willing to belong to the larger society, and that he/she is not out to subvert the social order.” But see the position of de KRUIJF (2002:233), who states that “...for Paul, participation in social life appears to be entirely on the edge of his mind, receiving minimal concentration. The contextual point is really the admonition to the community to join in the Pax Romana and not to invite persecution”. Similarly, NEIL ELLIOTT (1997:187-188) believes that Paul's benevolent characterization of the ruling authorities is a “contradiction of Paul's thought” and that “we can hardly suppose that Paul regarded the civil authorities with a resigned sense of inevitability.” However, as we have seen in our argument so far, this position gives no credit to Paul's more balanced and nuanced position vis-à-vis the place and role of authorities as part of God's intention for creation and for society.

central element of an authentic Christian life. It is clear from the context that for Paul love, as a practice of reconciliation, is not limited to the community of believers but must also extend to “the other” – who might be the enemy (12:14, 17, 21) or the governing authorities (13:1-7).

The last verses, 13:11-14, place Paul’s discussion within an eschatological framework as he encourages the believers to live appropriately “between the times,” following Christ as the example for Christian living. Paul was firmly convinced that with the death and resurrection of Jesus the new eschatological age has dawned, but it will only be completely established with Jesus’ second coming. Therefore, Christians live “between the times,” and as such they have the responsibility to live “honorably, as in the day” (v. 13). Paul assumes that the believers in Rome also “know what hour it is” and so they should “wake from sleep” (v. 11) and live up to the expectations of the new age – that is, to live fully in a manner that is appropriate to the new life that they share in Christ. This means to “lay aside the works of darkness” (v. 12b) such as “reviling and drunkenness,” “debauchery and licentiousness,” “quarrelling and jealousy,” (v. 13) and “gratifying the desires of the flesh” (v. 14b).²⁷ Instead, they should “put on the amour of light” (v. 12c) and indeed, “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 14b). It is significant that Paul includes the reference to the “Lord Jesus Christ” in the context of his emphasis on appropriate conduct in the world. This shows clearly that their lives, being radically defined by their union with Christ, must also be shaped by it. The lordship of Christ and his sovereignty over all creation, to which Paul points here by identifying Jesus as “Lord”, is the strongest ally in the fight against all kinds and forms of evil (Wright, 2005:39).

Conclusion

The above discussion leads us to conclude that Paul presents an active and positive involvement of the Christian in the world, advocating practices that are conducive to a meaningful and peaceful life in the larger society. In his exhortations, Paul gives primacy to practices of reconciliation as the appropriate Christian attitude to, and relationship with, the wider world, including the authorities. However, in Paul’s position, we can detect hints to support a view that the governing authorities can and should be held accountable to their God-given task. The entire discussion is placed in the framework of the lordship of Christ and of the

27 This is a clear indication to the “works of the flesh” which Paul lists in Galatians 5:19-21, but also to what he just said in Romans 1:28-32 describing the state of humanity in rebellion against God.

believers as being “in Christ.”

I have argued that Romans 13 should be interpreted within its immediate context as being bracketed by two exhortations to love (12:9-21 and 13:8-10). Paul wanted to show that the Christian commitment to love is not limited to individual relationships (within and outside the Christian community), but also includes the believers’ lives as responsible citizens in the society at large. While responding to a specific situation in Rome, Paul develops a larger view of the governing authorities in line with his Jewish theology; he presents the order of society under government as God’s intention. As such, believers should accept and be willing to live within such structures. Significantly, by presenting the “authorities” as God’s instruments and so making them answerable to God, Paul overrides their claim to being the ultimate and highest point of reference and their demand for total and unqualified obedience. It is thus Paul’s strong theological basis that both legitimizes and limits the authority of the government at the same time. We have concluded that a proper interpretation of Romans 13 would carefully consider Paul’s complex understanding of the dynamic of the relationship of Christians to the powers that be, as well as his appeal for critical engagement in the life of the city, and would thus avoid a rigid categorization of Paul as either a radical critic or a blind supporter of the political powers.

The Pauline vision of the church and its place in the world starts with the premise that the church’s very existence represents its primary task. As a community of reconciled people, the church demonstrates by its own existence that the rebelliousness of the powers has been conquered, and by its very presence and life it proclaims the lordship of Christ to the powers. That is why it is vital for the church to embody the message she proclaims in her own life in order to have a significant ministry to the society in general. It is only when the church first deals appropriately with various differences within her own life that she will experience an authentic reconciliation, that she will be able to say anything honest and effective to the larger society.

Paul’s argument in Romans 13 offers an excellent way of dealing with the serious questions of social evil and structures within the overall framework of creation, fall, redemption and reconciliation. It provides a way to integrate Paul’s understanding of reality into a holistic picture of God’s dealings with the world and humanity, and helps in dealing more adequately with the more general questions of gospel and culture, church and society, Christianity and politics.

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Corneliu Constantineanu

Biblija i javnost: Pavlov model za kršćanski angažman u društvu s upućivanjem na Poslanicu Rimljanima 13

Sažetak

U kontekstu u kojemu značajnost Svetoga pisma za svakodnevno življenje blijedi, ovaj je članak argument o središnjosti Biblije kao temelja za holističko shvaćanje stvarnosti i autentičnoga kršćanskog angažmana u suvremenom društvu. Argument se temelji na dvostrukoj istini: gospodstvu Isusa Krista nad čitavom stvarnošću i općoj naravi evanđelja. Još podrobnije, rad nudi pregled Rimljanima 13 vezano uz pitanje kršćanskoga odnosa prema vlastima. U radu se dokazuje kako Pavao nudi zdrav teološki temelj na kojemu istovremeno legitimizira i ograničava autoritet vlasti, te predstavlja aktivno i pozitivno angažiranje kršćana u svijetu, zagovarajući prakse koje pridonose značajnom i miroljubivom življenju u širem društvu. U radu se zaključuje da je prema Pavlovom viđenju otkupljenja, crkva, kao paradigmataska zajednica novoga stvorenja, pozvana aktivno sudjelovati u društvu, imati konstruktivan, čak ponekad i kritički odnos prema vlastima i upraviteljskim strukturama, ispovijedajući i svjedočeći Kristovo gospodstvo nad čitavom stvarnošću, u očekivanju konačnog otkupljenja Božjega stvorenja.