

"PAUL IN ROME AND TODAY"

(Romans 13:1-7)

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Paul in Rome

Another context we must take into consideration in assessing the significance of this text is the Roman empire in Paul's day. Three elements are important here. (1) Paul himself had a generally positive experience with Roman governmental officials. As a citizen of Rome, he had certain privileges, which aided him in Phillipi (Acts 16) and later in Jerusalem (21:39; 22:23-29; 25:10-11). The Roman governor of Achaia declined to forbid the preaching of the gospel when the Jews asked him to (18:12-17).

(2) Some interpreters think these good experiences led Paul to be naive about Rome and to encourage Christians blindly to obey the emperor and his minions. But this interpretation ignores a second set of data. Paul believed that the Lord of his life was unjustly killed by the Roman empire. Surely the fact of the crucified Jesus, basic to Paul's own faith and his preaching alike, would have kept him from any naiveté about government. In addition, the history of God's people, so important in forming Paul's own belief system, was filled with examples of men and women who earned great heavenly reward precisely for disobeying evil rulers (e.g., Dan. 3; 6).

(3) A final element of the first-century Roman empire may also play a role in Romans 13:1-7: a growing discontent with the power of the government. The Roman historian Tacitus tells us that there was considerable resistance in the middle 50s to paying indirect taxes, culminating in a tax revolt in A.D. 58.

These forces at work in the larger society may have led the Roman Christians to question their need to obey the government. Greatly exacerbating such tendencies was the indirect influence of the Jewish zealot movement. Some of the Christians in Rome were Jewish, and some may well have sympathized with the increasingly prominent and popular revolutionary program of the Zealots, who were seeking to rescue Israel from Roman oppression by violence.

In conclusion, what we know of the history of the period suggests that the Christians in Rome may have become imbalanced in their view of government, led by the unrest of their broader culture, the influence of the Zealots, and their own "world-renouncing" theology to regard governmental authority as something to be ignored at will. Romans 13:1-7 may well be an attempt to right this imbalance. In other words, Paul is not giving a careful, balanced teaching about the state; rather, he is deliberately focusing on only one side of the issue.

Our Own Context

It can be tempting to think of "context" as something that affects only the biblical authors. We



must indeed recognize their cultural situation and allow for it as we interpret what they wrote. But if the biblical authors wrote in a certain context, we also read in a specific context, and that context affects the way we read. With no issue is our own context more determinative than in this matter of submission to government.

(1) Most of us read the text within the tradition of the liberal democracies of the twentieth century. We are accustomed to governments elected by the people, following certain broad, humanitarian guidelines in their laws and procedures, susceptible to pressure brought on them by ordinary citizens. All this is completely foreign to Paul's context. Transferring what he and other biblical authors say about government from their political situation to ours is not easy. Christians who still live under autocratic and even repressive regimes can probably appreciate what Paul is teaching better than those of us who have never had to live in this kind of atmosphere.

(2) We read Romans 13 with the horrifying example of the Holocaust vivid in our memory. Here is a modern incarnation of a demonic governmental system at its worst. Almost every interpretation of Romans 13 written since 1945 explicitly brings the situation of Hitler's Germany into the discussion. It is pointless to claim that such experiences do not affect our interpretation. Would Karl Barth have argued as strongly that spiritual powers (potentially evil ones) are behind human rulers if he had not fled Nazi Germany before World War II? Would Ernst Kasemann have been as skeptical about the Pauline authorship of this passage if he had not almost been arrested and sent to a concentration camp for preaching the gospel during the war?

Few of us have so direct an experience of governmental evil. But some of us have, and all of us have imbedded deep within us the sense that human rulers can turn against God and his people and take on the attitudes and policies of the devil himself. We cannot divest ourselves of this knowledge; nor should we, because it counts as evidence about the world as it now functions under God. But we must also acknowledge the ways in which the broad culture and our own experiences perhaps prevent us from reading and applying Romans 13 as we should.