

## "THE PROBLEM OF ROMANS 13:1-7"

(Romans 13:1-7)

(Frank Theilman)

Paul's unqualified endorsement of governmental authority as God's agent for good and for the benefit of God's people has posed a hermeneutical problem for the church for centuries. How is it possible to be obedient to this part of God's word and yet recognize that governmental officials often enact unjust policies at cross purposes with God's moral standards and the church's witness to them? In hermeneutical situations like this, it is often helpful to sit at the feet of Christians from ages past whose thought about how to apply these passages was clarified in the crucible of suffering.

### **The Perennial Problem of Romans 13:1-7**

Origen begins his third-century commentary on Romans 13:1-7 this way: Perhaps someone will say: What then? Is even that authority that persecutes God's servants, attacks the faith, and subverts religion, from God?" Origen had grown up in a church familiar with Roman persecution, and a few years after writing his commentary on Romans he would be arrested, imprisoned, and tortured under the anti-Christian policies of the emperor Decius. His questions, then, are not merely academic.

The same can be said about the exegetical work on Romans 13:1-7 of Ernst Kasemann many centuries later. The governing authorities in the Germany of the late 1930s told Kasemann and other members of the Confessing Church to confine their preaching to the heavenly realm, not to comment on politics, and to avoid any ecclesial action that members of the Nazi party in their churches might interpret as a threat. Violation of these instructions had severe consequences. The Gestapo arrested Kasemann three days after he preached a sermon on Isaiah 26:13 at a prayer meeting in the west German town of Gelsenkirchen. He had suggested that God, not the Fuhrer, was the church's Lord and that the German people were not the chosen people of God. To excuse their mistreatment of pastors like Kasemann, the Gestapo appealed to the idea that such people were disruptive to "public safety and order. Not surprisingly Kasemann, like Origen, had questions about 13:1: "What does [to submit is a necessity] mean? What is the real aim of the apostolic argument for it? Is there any limit to the obedience which is here being demanded?"

### **Compliance until the Government Makes Bearing Witness to the Gospel in Deed and Word Impossible**

Both Origen and Kasemann have something to teach the church about the theological application of 13:1-7. Origen observes that when Paul speaks of obedience to the government, he is speaking of government in a general sense and assumes that, in this sense, it is a gift from God intended to punish evil and praise what is good. Like the God-given faculties of sight, hearing, and thought, however, government can be used for good or ill, and God will judge impious governments just as he will judge those who use their sight, hearing, and reasoning power for impiety and injustice. Where government allows Christians to live as Christians, however, the church "should not oppose secular rulers and authorities," but "through the quietness and tranquility of life it should practice the work of righteousness and piety. "

In other words, Christians in totalitarian regimes such as the Roman Empire of the mid-third century should leave the judgment of the government to God. This means complying with the governments requirements as long as these requirements do not interfere with the ability of Christians to live out their faith with integrity. Origen's reference



to "righteousness" refers to Christian ethics and his reference to "piety" refers to Christian worship.

Kasemann's view of 13:1-7 is more complex but follows the same basic pattern. He observes that Paul's admonition to submit to the governing authorities helpfully prevents Christians from living in a world of their own, detached from the circumstances of everyday life. God is the creator of the world, and he has given these circumstances to his people so that they can stake his claim in the world and announce his lordship over it. When Paul says in 13:5, however, that submission to the government is necessary not only because of wrath but also because of "conscience" he makes clear that "Christian obedience is never blind; and, indeed, open-eyed obedience, directed by [conscience], must even be critical."

Kasemann then interprets 13:5 through the lens of Philippians 1:9 where Paul prays that the Philippian believers' love "may abound more and more with knowledge and discernment". With respect to submission to the government, Kasemann says, "discernment" requires that the church draw the boundary of its obedience at the place where the government prevents Christians from living out their identity and task as Christians. In practical terms, this means that when the government forbids the Christian from bearing faithful witness to Christ's lordship over the world and engaging in humble service to others, the Christian must disobey the government. In these circumstances the "conscience" of the believer that Paul refers to in 13:5 should lead him or her not to submission but to resistance.

Sometimes, says Kasemann, the government may narrow down "the Church's room for manoeuvre even into the compass of a prison cell or a grave," but also "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." It is difficult not to imagine that with this last line Kasemann was thinking, in particular, of all those church bodies that compromised with the government of the Third Reich between 1933 and 1945.