

**Stephen Backhouse**

# **Benign Indifference: Patriotism, Protest and the Theological Politics of Romans 13:1-7**

Christians on all sides of the debate regarding place of patriotic affection and national allegiance invariably find themselves wrestling with Paul's injunction to submit to the governing authorities in Romans 13:1-7. Patriots read in this passage a clarion call to civic participation in the best interests of their nation. Radicals see instead a moral judgement on all states and an ethic of suffering submission to evil that effectively pits Christians against their countries. The paper argues that when it comes to the question of the earliest Christian attitude towards nations and states as found in Romans a controlling motif can be discerned, and that motif is best described as *benign indifference*. As such Romans (and the indeed the wider New Testament) does not endorse the family of feelings best known as patriotism (love for country). At the same time, neither does it endorse a radical attack on national forms of life (hatred of country). The political ethos of Romans is socially subversive. However, this subversion is not the goal, but a secondary by-product of the sweeping re-orientation of values and Christian identity that Paul works out in Romans. Both the patriotic and the radical approaches to 13:1-7 make much of the passage as a guide to government and to the citizen's towards their countries, yet both camps fail to consider the wider context of Romans and the Pauline corpus, which is remarkable sanguine about these things. The paper reads Paul's treatment of submission to authority in light of his treatment of submission to evil and to the weaker brother. In each case, Paul is far less concerned with those on the receiving end of right Christian action than he is with the Christians themselves. Christians are to submit to state authority, but this submission derives from priorities other than those of the life of the state itself. Any reading of this text that focuses on states and nations distorts the ethical injunction of the passage, which is only secondarily concerned with the effect that submission might have on a country (positively or negatively), and primarily concerned with the attitude of Christ-like submission in its own right. Christian submission springs not from the supposed superiority of the state and its natural created function, as the patriots would maintain; rather the reverse is true. No longer bound by the old cultural and national markers, in effect Paul is telling the Christians that they can condescend to abide by the old system for a time, because these things are ultimately a matter of indifference. Yet this newfound 'Christian superiority' is not directed *against* the state either. Paul is not seeking to eliminate one's country any more than he wants to wipe out one's weaker brother. A theo-political ethos of benign indifference charts a new course between the traditional forms of protest and patriotism.

## **Introduction**

Historically, it has been a common assumption among Christians that when it comes to national affiliation and feelings of allegiance to one's country, patriotism is a virtue. At the same time, running alongside or underneath the popular majority opinion has been an

undercurrent of dissent. For these Christians, patriotism is a vice. When debating how to think Christianly about the extent of Christian loyalty to the nation these conversations lead, as they inevitably must, to Romans 13:1-7. 1

Unsurprisingly, when it comes to theo-political interpretations of Romans 13 as a guide to Christian attitudes towards their countries, commentators are at something of a standoff. Amongst the wealth of voices can generally be found two dominant schools of thought: 'patriotic' and 'radical'. Patriots see in the text an exhortation to preserve the status quo of the natural created order of authority by promoting an active, positive participation in the affairs of state, up to and very much including dying and killing for one's country. Radicals cover the opposite end of the spectrum. Far from a loyalty to the nation, 13:1-7 promotes a subversive agenda of protest against the country. As a portrait of right governance, Romans 13 is taken to be essentially 'negative', raising the bar so high on earthly states that Christians cannot help but weigh and find them wanting. This results in critical non-participation or outright opposition to certain machinations of the state, notably state-sponsored violence. Thus the patriotic and radical commentators do not agree on what to make of Paul's instruction to one of Christianity's earliest communities. Does Romans 13 preach acceptance of the status quo, or even positive support of the national interest? Or is it doing the opposite – provoking a counter-cultural movement intent on passing judgement on the old order and providing a programme for sedition towards one's country?

I suggest that a helpful way out of this impasse is to read Romans 13 in light of Paul's attitude towards cultural affiliation and allegiance found elsewhere in Romans and other writing. Once we consider the ways in which Paul envisions a new Christian people drawn from Jew and Gentile cultures we see how the priorities for this people are adjusted, re-evaluating what is socially and spiritually important. I propose that the patriots and radicals alike share in the error of attaching *too much* importance to Romans 13 as a document detailing the minutiae of Christian social interaction with their countries. Instead, when Paul's 'open-handed' approach to the cultural markers of ethnicity, custom and religion are brought into the conversation, we see that actions and behaviour once considered of crucial importance to life in the world are now objects of *benign indifference*.

An attitude of benign indifference is not tantamount to conservative support of the status quo. Paul cannot be recruited on behalf of Christian patriotism. Commentators who recognise the strong whiff of subversion in Romans 13 are on to something. However, members of the radical school are mistaken if they assume that this subversion was Paul's intent. Paul's attitude is certainly radical, however, a doctrine of overt political revolution is not the best frame for the Pauline ethic. Instead, I propose that the 'counter-cultural' element implicit in Romans is a secondary by-product of the seismic shift in identity that Paul sees for Christians in the light of Christ. Paul's attitude of benign indifference is one born of a re-alignment of priorities, and is not bound to, or even very much concerned with, those things important to the old order: cultural and ethnic allegiance, national interest, economic status, social standing, religious practice and the 'rights' of the citizen.

We will first look at some sample 'patriotic' and 'radical' readings of Romans 13. Next, we will consider Paul's rethinking of culture and the place of importance that this has in Romans. Then we will be able to look again at 13:1-7, reading the passage in light of its wider context in the epistle and also its relationship to the Jesus tradition. Obviously the material on Pauline

studies is prodigious. This is not the place for a comprehensive literature review. Underlying the present argument are two academic assumptions. The first is that 13:1-7 is not an interpolation onto the original letter, and that its teaching aligns with the theological and ethical ideas found elsewhere in the epistle. <sup>2</sup> The second important assumption is that at times Paul intentionally alludes to and works with material from the Jesus tradition. Furthermore, even in those cases where the allusion is doubtful, there remains no *essential* disjunction between the ethics of Jesus and that of Paul on this point. <sup>3</sup>

## Patriotic

As with all such designations, 'patriotic' is primarily here a label of convenience useful for identifying some common approaches to 13:1-7. The attribution does not include only literalist biblical interpretation, or adherents to right-wing political ideology. The patriot differs from the radical simply in that he or she does not see in Romans 13 a manifesto for political change, eschatological transcendence of earthly authority, or subversion of the powers that be.

A common trope in patriotic readings is identification with the natural order of creation, described in terms of hierarchical authority. <sup>4</sup> For example, J D G Dunn reads Romans 13 with a politically realist view of the situation for the Jewish-Gentile Christians of Rome. <sup>5</sup> Paul, Dunn suggests, is not here identifying anything theologically or ethically new. Instead, he is suggesting to his Christian readers a common-sense approach that would serve *any* group in a precarious situation well. <sup>6</sup> Thus, Romans 13 is merely a reaffirmation of Jewish wisdom born from long periods of ethnic Israel living under the rule of foreign "regional superpowers". <sup>7</sup> Pressing home the basic principle of natural order in verses 2-5, Paul can assert that to resist the authorities who preserve order is equivalent to resisting the God who created that order. Dunn is quick to point out: "The argument does not depend on the assumption that a new state of affairs exists by virtue of Christ's ministry. These are rather the conditions under which the people of God have operated for centuries." <sup>8</sup> Dunn does not find in this passage anything of Christological or particularly eschatological flavour. In light of the socially vulnerable situation that Christians were in, Paul's teaching is *primarily* a policy of political prudence backed up by theological justifications. <sup>9</sup> By repeating the platitudes of good citizenship familiar to the Hellenistic terminology of the day, Paul was seeking to allay suspicions that these little Christian house meetings were hotbeds of social unrest.

Going further with an application of Romans 13:1-7 to political life is C E B Cranfield who argues for full-fledged Christian patriotic activity. Cranfield refers to Romans 12:1, concluding that the "living sacrifices" offered there as worship to God are offered also in one's subjection to earthly authorities. <sup>10</sup> Since no authority exists except that which has been established by God, rebellion against them is rebellion against God. "As God's servant and the instrument of Christ's kingly rule, [the state] has a *greater claim on one than one has on oneself...*" <sup>11</sup> Cranfield extrapolates from Romans (and from 1 Peter 2) a number of duties that he claims Christians owe to the powers that be as part of their submission and worship to God, including respect, responsible obedience, payment of taxes, witness to Christ and prayer for leaders. <sup>12</sup> Regarding modern, democratic contexts, Cranfield supplies 'extra' duties owed by a citizen in a democratic country, imbuing them with the same moral force as

the previous list of duties that he gleaned from the New Testament. <sup>13</sup> His list includes participating in elections, keeping oneself informed about political issues, "critical co-operation" with Government, and supporting just policies by letter writing, joining (or resigning from) a political party, organizing and attending mass protests, attending public meetings, etc. <sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Cranfield suggests the controversial obligation of participating in violence for the sake of one's country. In his opinion, it remains part of the Christian's duty, under certain circumstances, to be ready to join in military action at the command of the government. <sup>15</sup>

With his list of duties owed and his claim that Christians in all political contexts are to "do what they can" to promote and preserve their state, Cranfield explicitly reads Romans 13 as laying out a programme for patriotic action and ethos.

## Radical

By contrast, the radical reading finds in Romans 13:1-7 an implicit judgement of all earthly states. Far from establishing the status quo as ordained by God, the radicals find in these passages a set of criteria that no human system has ever lived up to. The nation is then found to be a sort of anti-Christ, arrogantly opposed to God. While it is true that God makes use of these earthly powers, the relationship is far more one of God bringing good from evil, rather than God stamping his divine mark of approval upon human organisational activity. Consequently, radical commentators drastically shorten the list of duties that are rightfully 'owed' to the state. Often evident in this school is the argument that Paul's use of 'powers' (*exousiae*) in 13:1 contains the same strong 'spiritual' element that is apparent in other Pauline references to powers and principalities. <sup>16</sup> If the agents of human government are to be understood as controlled by, or equivalent to, the 'principalities and powers' of the spiritual realm, then the whole issue of submission and allegiance is cast in a different light.

J H Yoder is a prime example of a 'radical' reader of Romans. His abiding commitment to pacifism and non-resistance <sup>17</sup> is accompanied by antipathy towards all states and nations. Drawing from the wider New Testament context, specifically where Satan tempts Jesus with the rule of earthly kingdoms in Matthew 4:8-9 and the demonic state example of Revelation 13, Yoder claims: "there is a very strong strand of Gospel teaching which sees secular government as the province of the sovereignty of Satan." <sup>18</sup> Yoder expresses sympathy with the 'demonic' principalities and powers interpretation of *exousiae* in Romans 13. <sup>19</sup> For Yoder, any ethical application of Romans 13 that ignores the spiritually diabolical aspect of earthly government leads to premature triumphalism on behalf of the Christians living in their host country. In this light, and read in conjunction with Romans 12 and the rest of 13, submission to authorities can only be an expression of suffering and serving love, not a call to patriotic participation in the interests of a 'good' government. <sup>20</sup>

Central to Yoder's ethical analysis of Romans are the issues surrounding the State's use of violence, and the Christian's participation in the wielding of the sword. Christians are told in 12.19 never to exercise vengeance but to leave it to God. Then, in 13.4, the authorities are recognised as executing this very function. According to Yoder, it is inconceivable that these two passages are to be read independently of each other. "This makes it clear that the function exercised by government is not the function to be exercised by Christians." <sup>21</sup>

Instead of a ringing endorsement of the country and its functions, Yoder finds in this passage a set of standards that will inevitably show government wanting.

There are criteria whereby the functioning of government can be measured... it is a mark or measure of the extent by which the government is accomplishing its ministry. *To be 'minister to you for good' is a criterion, not a description.* 22

No country can live up to the standard of 'individual good' if one considers (as Yoder does) that this 'good' is not measured by economic or social stability, but rather by the standards of sacrificial neighbourly love embodied by Jesus and the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount.

Paul commands the Romans to render what is due to the authorities (13:7). Yet if one holds that the aims and activities of human nations are manifestly not God's aims, then one will be led to a very different picture of what Christians rightfully owe to one's country than the one who maintains that nations represent and preserve God's good purpose upon the earth. As we have seen, patriotic interpretations of this verse tend towards listing *all* those things that a country needs to function. By contrast, Yoder protests that this makes nonsense of the clear invitation in Romans to render with discrimination. 23 He agrees with those commentators who hear in v7 an intentional echo of Jesus' teaching to 'render unto Caesar' (Mark 12.7, Matthew 22.21, Lk 22.35). 24 If it is the case that Paul is alluding to the well known Jesus tradition here, then such teaching does not lead to indiscriminate blanket commitment but rather to a sort of 'bare minimum' payment of money and a modicum of respect. Participation in state-sponsored violence is thus exempt from 'what is owed' to the powers that be. Equally important for Yoder's argument is how Paul instructs the Roman Christians to give each his due in 13:7, and then immediately moves to a clear description of what that debt consists of in the next verse, where nothing is due except love. The claims of Caesar are to be weighed against the command of love, which itself is defined in v10 as that which does no harm to neighbours. Thus, says Yoder, verses 1-7 cannot be construed to justify participation in violent action. 25

A Christian community that refuses to take part in the violence that accompanies national self-interest will invariably be at odds with the wishes of the government and wider population. Yoder stresses the difference between the 'subordination' commanded in 13.1 and the 'obedience' that patriots often read here in its place. Greek has many good words for 'obedience', and Paul uses none of them. 26 Paul's command is not for Christians to obey but to humbly submit to the authorities. The one who refuses to fight for Caesar but who still allows Caesar to punish him has been disobedient, but has remained subordinate. Like Cranfield, Yoder connects the 'living sacrifices' of 12:1 with the 'submission' of 13:1. However, unlike Cranfield who paints a picture of positive and enthusiastic service to government as service to God, Yoder focuses on the suffering that will result from submission to a hostile authority. 27 By making the clear distinction between 'obedience' and 'submission', Yoder is able to read in Romans a teaching of critical non-participation in earthly society. For Yoder, 13:1-7 does not lead to either conservative, safe quietism with its tacit support of the authorities, or to patriotism, with its active participation in the public life. Instead the instruction is essentially counter-cultural, inevitably leading to a clash with the machineries and aims of the state.

## Benign Indifference

Where patriots see countries as essentially good things that sometimes go bad, radicals think of them as bad things that sometimes God can use for good. Patriots argue for a reading of Romans that promotes the natural order of nation and state as components of God's purpose for the world. For their part, radicals see the text as a fundamentally counter-cultural document, opposed to the status quo and providing a manifesto for judgement, non-participation or direct opposition to the powers that be.

The patriotic interpretation is inadequate for two, related reasons. The first is in their treatment of the relationship between Paul and Jesus. The nature of Paul's theological, ethical and social relationship to Jesus and the tradition around him is an important one, worthy of careful attention. However, patriots do not seem to provide this care. Patriots endorse a political ethic that is commonsensical and open to all groups (Christian and non-Christian alike) and they underwrite an emotional and physical commitment to the nation's self interest up to and including killing and being killed for one's country. By so doing, they bypass thorny issues such as the renouncement of the violent defence of rights, the expectation of persecution, and the pattern of a cruciform life modelled by Jesus as found in the Gospels and elsewhere in the New Testament. <sup>28</sup> As well as skirting around this troublesome Jesus material, patriots also avoid what is going on within Romans itself. By taking 13:1-7 out of its context (ignoring, for example, the command to avoid vengeance in 12:19 and the definition of what is 'owed' in 13:8-10) many commentators are able to paint a picture of 'patriotic' participation in the nation that is completely at odds with Paul's wider project in Romans, let alone the way that the Pauline ethic has been shaped by a 'Kingdom' ethos.

It is a mark of strength that the radical position takes seriously the specifically *Christian* aspects of the instruction to the Romans (as opposed to a generic political ethic) recognising the resonance between the Jesus and Pauline traditions. Like their patriotic counterparts, however, the radicals often attempt to squeeze too much from 13:1-7. Yoder reads it as a tract detailing the criteria for good government and a call to non-violent resistance. Yet the result is to turn the passage into a sort of practical manual for social dissent, endowing it with a burden it was not meant to bear. At one point, Yoder argues that 13:1-7 is irrelevant to questions of military duty because such a possibility was not open to the original Roman Christians. <sup>29</sup> This then makes it not a little inconsistent when he goes on to turn the passage into a textbook example of the New Testament's witness to pacifism and radical non-participation. Even accounting for the difference between 'submission' and 'obedience' the intentionally seditious nature of Yoder's reading of Romans-as-social-critique sits uneasily with the tone of verses 13:1-7. It is highly dubious to assert that Paul envisioned, let alone positively encouraged, an overhaul of the social and political landscape.

The radicals are correct to notice the socially subversive nature of the Pauline ethic. However, I suggest that this subversion is not the goal, but a secondary by-product of the sweeping re-orientation of values and Christian identity that Paul works out in Romans. It is perfectly possible that Paul can work from a place of benign indifference to the national interest *and* that the ethic found in Romans remains social dynamite. To see how this is so, we need to consider Paul's changing attitude towards cultural allegiance and ethnic affiliation, and his readjustment of priorities in the light of this re-evaluation.

From the outset in Romans Paul locates the impetus for his gospel mission in the cultural conflicts of his current age. <sup>30</sup> The occasion for Romans was the Jewish-Gentile tensions inherent in the church, with each side apparently considering themselves better than the other. An exploration of the new Christian relationship to the 'host' cultures from which the Church has been drawn is a consistent theme throughout Romans. In chapters 1-11 we find Paul systematically stripping away those cultural markers that the fledgling Christian movement might be tempted to fall back on when looking to establish its identity. <sup>31</sup> The old things are simply no longer as important as they once were; there are now new priorities that shape the new people. This is in keeping with the biblical tradition of Paul's 'open handed' attitude towards cultural allegiance, rights, and other earthly precedents. <sup>32</sup> Even those places in Romans where Paul seems to explicitly identify with the national identity and interests of Israel point towards his new attitude. <sup>33</sup> These passages of stark identification with Israel in Romans are tempered by Paul's equally forceful disavowals (*skubalon!*) of this culture in other epistles, and with other accounts of his use of Roman citizenship to serve his mission. <sup>34</sup> In short, all that we know of Paul <sup>35</sup> suggests that he was adept at using citizenship and ethnic identity as a tool, to take up and lay down when it suited his purpose. At no time does Paul treat allegiance to his fellow countrymen as an end in itself. It is always and only a means to an end, and as such, Paul is happy to push the right buttons when it suits his gospel rhetoric.

At the same time that Paul seeks to carry the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles, he also carries out a missiological polemic that takes the shape of a Jewish critique of Jewish nationalism. <sup>36</sup> The symbolic world of Judaism focussed on temple, Torah, land and racial identity. <sup>37</sup> It was these cultural markers that remained the locus for thought and writing during Israel's continuing 'exile' under Roman domination. Those who remained within the boundaries demarcated by the national characteristics of land, tradition, religion and race could be assured that it was they who would stand vindicated by God at the appointed time. Furthermore, Israel's understanding of its own election included the belief that it was through Israel that the other nations would be judged. <sup>38</sup>

Paul's new understanding was that the categories had shifted in light of recent events. Romans 2:17-24 points out that due to the existence of immorality within Israel, the national/racial boast of its state of righteousness is thrown into question with regard to the covenant. The solution is provided in 3:21-31, where the faithfulness of God is revealed not in Israel as a nation, but in Jesus the Messiah, for the benefit of Jew and Gentile. <sup>39</sup> Romans 4:10-12 establishes that the new Christians are not of the family of Abraham according to national characteristics, but instead Abraham is the father of all who believe.

The warning against cultural superiority cuts both ways, as Paul is also keen to remind his Gentile readers that their Jewish brethren are not now to be dismissed as irrelevant. Chapters 9 and 10 relate the burden that the Jews have borne for the rest of the world as part of the covenant purpose, the end of chapter 10 and the whole of 11 expound on the missionary purpose connected to Israel's current position. Paul stresses to his potentially anti-Jewish Gentile readers that there can be no nationalistic privilege on either side. None of the members of the body of Christ have occasion to feel culturally or ethnically superior – after all if God did what He did to the natural branches, he can certainly do the same to the new additions (11:21).

Paul's reassessment of cultural identity provides a useful key to understanding the ethical import of Romans 13:1-7. The passage is not an isolated parenthesis, to be read apart from the ethical treatments on either side of it in chapters 12-15, or from the foundations laid down in 1-11. After establishing the existence of a new people in 1-11, Paul turns his attention the ethical implications of this people in 12-15. Signalling the advent of a new type of life, Paul opens the section with the exhortation not to conform any longer to the pattern of the world (12:2). Considering the contents of 1-11, it can be seen that this pattern is made up in part by the claims that national affiliation and religious practices used to hold over the new Christians.

A common thread running throughout 12-15 is an awareness of ethical reprioritisation in light of being a 'new people'. So for example, Christians are to eschew their 'right' of retaliating in kind: do not repay anyone evil for evil (12:17), live at peace with everyone (12:18), do not take revenge (12:19). Instead of common-sense retaliation or defence against evil, Paul's conclusion is that one should bless one's persecutor (12:14). Taken as a whole, 12:9-21 is remarkably less concerned with changing evil and combating its various forms than with the Christian's 'submission' to it. At this point it is not insignificant to note that if we take away the verses and chapter headings imposed on the text by later interlocutors, the reading would flow easily from 12.21 to 13.1 without a pause. Paul's example of "overcoming evil with good" is that "everyone must submit to the governing authorities."

The new people of Christ have a different focus in life than the old world which is concerned with reform, revenge and reward. <sup>40</sup> Chapters 14-15 continue the theme with Paul's discussion on the 'stronger' and 'weaker' brothers. Along with the culture wars of Jew and Gentile came the vexed question of food and purity laws. The 'strong' camp believed that all foods were pure, whilst the 'weak' were still plagued by guilty consciences. <sup>41</sup> Elsewhere in Romans Paul is clear that he does not consider the purity arguments and religious laws to hold sway over the Christian. <sup>42</sup> Accordingly, one might expect Paul here to muster all his arguments against the weak, fighting to change what was obviously wrong into something right. Yet this is not the tack that Paul takes. The salient point about Paul's treatment of this dilemma is the way that he encourages the strong to submit to their weaker brothers, while at the same time acknowledging the weaker brothers to be in the wrong. Significantly (as in 1 Corinthians) the overwhelming ethical force of the passage here is directed towards those whom Paul considers to already be in the right. Any change that results in the weaker brother becoming stronger, whilst welcomed, remains incidental to the purpose of the instruction.

Both the patriotic and the radical approaches to 13:1-7 make much of the passage as a guide to government and to the citizen's attitude towards the state. Yet both approaches ignore the new Christian ethic that Paul is working out here in Romans. It is helpful to read Paul's treatment of submission to authority in the same light that we read his treatment of submission to evil and to the weaker brother. In each case, Paul is far less concerned with those on the receiving end of right Christian action than he is with the Christians themselves. 'Heaping coals' on the enemy's head is not the *motivation* for doing good, and the right action remains right, regardless of the immediate effect (or not) on evil. Likewise, the stronger brother's humility is not driven by the desire to change the weaker brother. That evil might be overcome, and that the weaker brother might become more mature in his convictions is all well and good, but the Christian impetus lies elsewhere than in these conventional 'successes'. It is the same for 13:1-7. Christians are to submit to state authority,



but this submission derives from priorities other than those of the life of the state itself. Any reading of this text that focuses on states and nations distorts the ethical injunction of the passage, which is only secondarily concerned with the effect that submission might have on a country (positively or negatively), and primarily concerned with the attitude of Christ-like submission in its own right.

The people's new identity is marked by the peculiar living sacrificial love (12:1-3) in imitation of Christ's submission to those less worthy than himself (15:1-9). Thus Christian submission springs not from the supposed superiority of the state and its natural created function, as the patriots would maintain; rather the reverse is true. No longer bound by the old cultural and national markers, in effect Paul is telling the Christians that they can condescend to abide by the old system for a time, because these things are ultimately a matter of indifference. <sup>43</sup> Yet this newfound 'Christian superiority' is not directed *against* the state either. Paul maintains that as with the existence of 'evil' and 'weaker brothers', earthly authorities are God's responsibility, not the Christian's (13:1). Paul is not seeking to eliminate government any more than he wants to wipe out the weaker brothers.

The subversive element inherent in this passage negates patriotic affection; however, this revolutionary spark lies dormant in the formation of a new people, it is not overt. If Christians are indeed no longer conformed to the old patterns of this world, then their open-handed attitude towards all that everyone else holds dear will inevitably be construed as counter-cultural. Yet it jumps the gun to turn 13:1-7 into a manifesto for radical action, or a list of criteria by which to justify political sedition.

Both Romans and the Jesus tradition share the element of non-resistance twinned with the social consequences that come from a drastic re-adjustment in identity. In the Sermon on the Mount, the potential political incendiary nature of the Jewish Messianic expectation is off-set by Jesus' attitude towards violent resistance, material possessions and the laying aside of what one is rightfully due. The instructions found in Matthew 5:38-42 would have struck a peculiar chord with the original Jewish audience living under Roman military occupation. Yet the Sermon maintains its subversive nature whilst avoiding obvious incitement to rebellion. It is useful here to note the point of contact between Jesus' famous injunction to render to Caesar what is Caesar's (Matthew 22:15-22) and Paul's instruction to give everyone what they owe, especially in relation to taxes and revenue (Romans 13:6-7). <sup>44</sup> The passages re-evaluate the priorities of the new people of God. Instead of becoming embroiled in the 'hot-button' political issues of paying taxes to a foreign Emperor, both Jesus and Paul bypass the shallow debate with a solution that clarifies the real issue at hand. What do the people of God owe to earthly powers? Answer: some material goods, some basic respect, and submission in the form of laying aside one's moral right to hold these things back. The people of the kingdom of God are free from the trappings of statecraft, yet their freedom does not take the form of rebellion. Instead, the new people that Paul identifies as patterned after Christ are 'strong', able to recognise who is 'weak', *and to submit to them anyway*.

In terms of finding the ethical force of Romans 13:1-7, it is good not to set our sights too low, and focus solely on its application to the minutiae of socio-political life, as if that summed up the totality of what Paul was attempting to do with his Roman ethics. When we consider Paul's allegiance and attitude towards common cultural markers, then it becomes difficult to read verses 1-7 as championing a cause either *for* or *against* the country as such. For Paul the

stuff of this world is essentially a matter of unconcern, to be taken up or laid aside as necessary. Human organisations of power and allegiance, of utmost priority to the old world, are relatively unimportant for the new people of God, either as objects of desire or as targets for criticism. Thus, the subversive ethic in Romans 13 is as inevitable as it was unintended, for it flows from an attitude of benign indifference rather than from a place of patriotic loyalty, bitter opposition or cringing inferiority. <sup>45</sup> It is the Christians, after all, who are God's children. Caesar is only a servant.

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## Endnotes

- 1 The issue of the difference between 'nationalism' and 'patriotism' is a vexed one. I am working here with an understanding that, despite some attempts to differentiate the terms (for example, in the work of Bonhoeffer) 'nationalism' and 'patriotism' are effectively synonymous terms, naming the set of feelings and emotive connections to one's national group best described as "love of country". While these feelings often take the form of jingoism, they are not restricted to that. Quiet pride, loyalty and at times great shame can be expressed in the name of love. I have discussed the issue elsewhere. See Backhouse 2013
- 2 On the textual coherence of this passage with the rest of Romans, see for example Bruce 1984: 78; Dunn 1988: 758; Donfried 1991: 244-251; Thompson 1991: 111 n1; Yoder 1972: 197ff. For our purposes, it is significant that none of the commentators mentioned in this paper, 'patriotic' or 'radical', support the interpolation theory, including Yoder, for whom such a conclusion would be convenient for his wider pacifist argument
- 3 See for example Cranfield 1959-60: 241ff; Dunn 1988: 768; Thompson 1991: especially 111-120; Wenham 2002; Yoder 1972: 211
- 4 See for example Dunn 1998: 771; and the collected expository sermons by Lloyd-Jones 2002: 32ff
- 5 "It would not even have occurred to Paul and his readers that they could exercise political power in a Roman city, far less that they by their efforts might change its structures." Dunn 1998: 770
- 6 Dunn 1988: 770
- 7 Dunn 1988: 771
- 8 Dunn 1988: 772. "It is simply a recognition that this is the way society operates, always has and always will."
- 9 Dunn 1988: 774

10 Cranfield 1965: 53

11 Cranfield 1965: 54 emphasis added

12 Cranfield 1965: 55-57

13 "It is an essential part of his proper subjection to the powers that be, and that for him to fail to render this extra would be to resist the power and so be guilty of rebellion against the ordinance of God (13.2) just as much as to fail to fulfil the obligations [listed above] would be." Cranfield 1965: 58

14 Cranfield 1965: 58-59

15 Cranfield 1965: 60

16 The most important references are 1 Corinthians 2:6ff, 6:1ff; Ephesians 2:2, 6:12. The debate over whether 'powers' here would have been understood by the original Roman readers as spiritual as well as earthly is long and varied. See the discussion in Morrison 1960

17 Yoder 1972: 204, defines 'non-resistance' as "giving up the right of retaliation in kind" with reference to Romans 12:7 and Matthew 5:39

18 Yoder 1972: 195

19 Although this does not form the core of his argument, Yoder does think that such an idea lends itself admirably to the sort of reading of Romans that he is here proposing. Yoder 1972: 196 n5. See also Dawn 1999: 168-188

20 Yoder 1972: 197. See also 198: "Any interpretation of 13:1-7 that would make it the expression of a static or conservative undergirding of the present social system would therefore represent a refusal to take seriously the context."

21 Yoder 1972: 199. Yoder takes the connection between 12:19 and 13:4 as more evidence that verses 1-7 are not an interpolation

22 Yoder 1972: 208 emphasis added

23 Yoder 1972: 211

24 Yoder 1972: 211. Although he disagrees with his ultimate conclusions, Yoder explicitly aligns himself with Cranfield on this point of Jesus and Paul

25 Yoder 1972:212. Yoder also points out that conscription into the Roman army was not one of the duties required of the original recipients of the epistle. Thus it is an error of simplistic literalism to include unquestioning support of State violence as belonging under the heading of 'being subject'." 205

26 Yoder 1972: 212

27 Compare Yoder 1972: 213 with Cranfield 1965: 53

28 See especially Matthew 5:3-12, 38-48; Luke 6:27-37

29 See Yoder 1972:205

30 Romans 1:14-17 sets the tone, where Paul's ministry is couched in terms of difference between Greek and non-Greek, Jew and Gentile

31 See for example Romans 1:16-32, 2:9-11, 17-29, 3ff, 5:12-21, 7:1-6, 8:15-17, 19, 9:1-9, 25-29, 10:12, 19-20, 11:13-25

32 1 Corinthians 8:13, 9:19-22 ("I have become all things to all men"), 10:23-11:1 ("Whatever you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God"); Galatians 2:11-21; Philippians 3:15-20, 4:11-12 ("I have learned the secret of being

content in every situation..."); Titus 1:15 ("To the pure, all things are pure..."). See note 57

33 Romans 9:1-5, 10:1-2, 11:1-6, 13-16

34 Philippians 3:2-9 "What was to my profit... I now consider excrement (*skubalon*)..."; 1 Corinthians 3:18-23, 10:1-5; 2 Corinthians 11:22, 12:10; Galatians 1:13-17, 3:6-11, 28-29 "There is neither Jew nor Greek...", 4:8-11, 5:1-12, 6:15; Colossians 2:8 "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy that depends on human tradition...", 16-18, 20-23, 3:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-10; Titus 1:10-16; Acts 16:37-39, 18:6, 21:39-22:3, 22:25-29 "I was born a citizen...", 23:23-35, 25:10-12 "I appeal to Caesar!". See note 35

35 The problems surrounding the authorial authenticity of the contested epistles and the historicity of Acts are duly noted. These sources bolster the argument, but the proposed picture of the Pauline character is not limited to them, and it can still be found within Romans and the undisputed letters

36 See Wright in Hay:1995: 35

37 Wright 1995: 32. See also Wright 1992: Part 3

38 Wright 1995:33

39 Wright 1995: 37. In Romans 4 Paul notes how this fulfils the covenant of Genesis 15

40 It is God, not man, who will ultimately deal with these things. Romans 12:19

41 A similar conflict is dealt with in 1 Corinthians 8

42 See for example Romans 14:14, 20, 15:1

43 See also James Hollingshead who finds the ethical message of verses 1-7 to be "almost trivial" in light of Paul's indifference to the importance of Rome. 1998: 211

44 On the 'Caesar' and 'Tax' passages in question, see Thompson 1991: 111-120. Thompson concludes that while Paul does not specifically acknowledge Jesus, a "dominical echo" is probable. In any case, the Roman Christians would have been reminded of Jesus' words, and assured that this brother from Tarsus stood in continuity with their tradition

45 Note that a theo-political ethos of benign indifference is not anti-social or misanthropic. Indeed the opposite is true. It is precisely because the overarching narratives of 'nation' and the structures of 'state' run roughshod over so many individuals, excluding and marginalising real people for the sake of abstract ideas of 'country' that a thorough going refusal to accord national self-interest pride of place is attractive. The Christian duty and love towards others does not cohere around ideas of 'nationhood' but around the reality of the 'neighbourhood'. See Backhouse 2011 and Backhouse 2013