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Political Obedience in Romans 13: 1-7

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A considerable amount of research has been done on the intellectual and religious background of the New Testament. But there is much in the New Testament which cannot be understood properly unless its social or political situation is known. For example, how can the exegete really understand what Paul means in 1 Corinthians 7: 21 if he does not have some understanding of how the system of slavery worked in the first century? There is room for much research in this field, and in the present essay Mr Kaye attempts to illumine our understanding of Romans 13: 1-7 in the light of its background.

In 1960 E. A. Judge wrote a very important monograph on *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century* (Tyndale Press, London), in which he made the very simple but quite fundamental point that no idea of social obligation can be 'properly understood except in the light of the situation to which it was addressed'.¹ I suspect that the application of this principle would deliver us from some of the problems that seem to arise in a passage like Romans 13: 1-7, so that we should not share the mistaken views of Brunner² and Cullmann³ that this passage is at root a statement of a theory of the state and that this concept of the state requires our submission.

The first task, then, is to identify as precisely as possible the situation addressed and to seek an understanding of the imperatives in the passage in the light of this. Since the real interest and difficulties lie in the arguments which Paul uses to support these exhortations, the second task should be to look elsewhere in his writings to see if similar social institutions or situations are referred to and what attitude is taken to them. One must emphasize that the purpose in doing this is to assist the exegesis of Romans 13: 1-7 and not to take counter-principles from other parts of the New Testament. Some, for example, have turned to such passages as Acts 5: 29 ('We must obey God rather than men') in order to avoid the implication that the Christian should submit even to tyrannical governments. This is most unsatisfactory since the Romans passage has no 'conscience clause', its commands are quite unconditional, and it is sufficiently a unity to demand its own exegesis. So first we must look at the passage itself.

The clearest reference to the situation addressed is in the exhortations of verses 6 and 7. They refer to

those to whom one pays taxes, revenue, fear and honour; these four come under the general heading of those to whom a debt is due, and the injunction is to give them their due. Cranfield says, 'the distinction between *phoros* (taxes) and *telos* (revenue) . . . is that between direct and indirect taxes'.⁴ Unfortunately, although it is true that Herodotus uses *phoros* (3: 13) when describing a city fixing its direct taxes, a similar sense is found for *telos* in Plato (*Republic* 425d) and later in inscriptions and papyri (e.g. P. Oxy. 1473, 30, third century AD). At the time of writing direct taxation was collected by the city authorities on the basis of census information. There were two main types of direct taxes, *tributum capitis* payable by all adults (in some places only by male adults) and *tributum soli* which was basically a land tax but probably took into account other capital assets. Indirect taxes such as customs dues and an inheritance tax on Roman citizens were collected by contractors and not municipal authorities.⁵ Such meagre evidence as there is goes against Cranfield's distinction and thus the terms do not afford much help in siting the social context. This is also true in regard to *phobos* (fear) and *timē* (honour), even though the words refer to the rulers as in verses 3 and 4.⁶

It is, however, verses 3 and 4 which offer more light on the elucidation of the social context of Paul's exhortations. Cranfield rightly says that these verses are puzzling, since in them 'Paul seems to take no account of the possibility of the government's being unjust and punishing good work and praising the evil'.⁷ He suggests three possible explanations. First, that Paul is oblivious to the possibility; secondly, that he is speaking of the 'true and natural duty of the magistrate' (Calvin); or, thirdly, that the promise is absolute and that even when the power intends to punish the Christian, this will nevertheless turn out to be praise. For this third interpretation Cranfield refers to Barth, Pelagius and Augustine, and he thinks that it is preferable to the other two. The first he thinks unlikely, and the second one-sided. I think Cranfield

⁴ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Commentary on Romans 12-13* (1965), p. 77.

⁵ On these points see, for example, M. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (19572).

⁶ Cranfield has argued at length for the interpretation of *phobos* as referring to God, but the objection of awkwardness, which he recognizes, tells against his position. The survey of 'fear' which is the kernel of his argument tends to overlook the possibility that the word may be used in different ways and with different degrees of strength, although he does recognize this possibility in his discussion of verse 7.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 72.

² E. Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*.

³ O. Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* (revised ed., 1963).

is right in his comments on the first two alternatives, and right in rejecting them. He is also right when he says that the third possibility is difficult. He overlooks a fourth alternative, namely that these verses are descriptive of the situation to which Paul was addressing himself.

The question arises whether such an evaluation of the administration of government can be contemplated for the time when Nero was emperor. He has such a bad reputation that it is thought difficult to imagine that Paul's comments can be taken as descriptive of the situation at the time. However, Nero was only seventeen when he became emperor in AD 54 and he was strongly under the influence of his mother Agrippina, particularly in palace affairs. It was not until AD 59 that he was rid of her influence when she was killed by Anicetus, a freedman and tutor of Nero. This murder was at the instigation of Nero, or at least with his agreement, and almost certainly his desire to be rid of his mother's influence was encouraged by Poppaea Sabina with whom he had become infatuated. After this imperial policy began to show his influence, but this led not to debauchery and corruption but to the development of the arts. The degeneration of the policy, as revealed in the historical sources, was in large measure due to his advisors and associates; in fact one suspects that Nero has received rather a bad press from the chroniclers of the time. In any case the question at issue is not the later period of Nero's reign, but the period before AD 59.

It is taken that Romans was written between AD 54 and 59, and during this time the effective government was strongly influenced by Seneca and Burrus. If one subscribes to the view that Nero was vicious and cruel from the beginning and that the good government of the early part of his principate is to be explained by his lack of interest in public affairs and the influence of others,⁸ this does not alter the fact that there was good government during this period. Indeed Tacitus indicates that Nero himself was inclined to humane reform particularly in the matter of indirect taxation (*Annals* 13). In addition there were able governors, such as Galba who was at various times in Aquitania, Upper Germany and Africa, Suetonius Paulinus in Britain, and Corbulo in Asia, Cappadocia and Galatia. Contemporary sources, therefore, do not falsify the suggestion that Romans 13: 3, 4 are a comment on the actual situation at the time of writing.

We turn, then, to the exegesis of the passage, and the first thing that strikes the reader is the extended reasoning given for the exhortations. This is unusual in the context, since in chapter 12 long lists of exhortations are found with no detailed reasons in support of them. If we ask why there is so much detail in chapter 13, we can answer in a variety of ways, depending probably on how we interpret the passage. If we take it as being of general significance, then we could say

that the Romans needed to be given this detailed theology since probably they did not know it or perhaps were not sure about it. Alternatively, if we take the passage as referring to the immediate situation only, then Paul offers his long explanations because he felt the need to justify his favourable attitude to the government. This may have been the more necessary because he knew of some ascetic, 'other-worldly' tendency in Rome. The difficulty is that the passage does not say why he gives the extended explanation, nor is there sufficient indication of Paul's awareness of the Romans and their attitudes to enable us to form any reasonable conclusion. Any answer to this question must therefore be pure conjecture, and cannot be used to support an exegesis of the passage.

Since the interpretation of the passage is so controversial, it might be of some assistance if we noted other references to similar social institutions in order to assess Paul's attitude to them. In general, he assumes that Christians will continue to maintain normal social relationships with their fellow-citizens. He himself apparently did not try to escape when imprisoned (though he avoided arrest by King Aretas); he told slaves to seek freedom but only through the means provided by the system (1 Cor. 7: 21). An exception would appear to be an unfavourable attitude to the law courts in 1 Corinthians 6: 1-11, but this is in regard to litigation between Christians. Such matters should be settled within the Christian group. His comments relate only to internal Christian discipline, and there is no suggestion that those who have recourse to the courts will not receive just treatment. The argument is simply that it is inappropriate for a Christian to have open litigation in the courts with another Christian.⁹

While an argument from silence is not conclusive, it does seem fair to say that Paul adopts a generally favourable attitude towards the government administration of his day. He certainly mentions it, and in such a way that, had he wanted to do so, he would certainly have expressed any opposition in principle that he had to it.

When we return to Romans 13: 1-7 we note that there are only four exhortations: *hupotassesthō* (be subject) in verse 1; *hupotassesthai* (be subject), verse 5; *teleite* (pay taxes), verse 6; *apodote* (pay), verse 7. The first two are substantially the same exhortation, and the last two are particular forms of the first two. Verses 1 and 2 argue for the first imperative and verses 3 and 4 add further argumentation in support. The imperative is repeated in verse 5. The argument in verses 3 and 4 is pragmatic and often taken to pre-

⁹ Paul does not discuss in this chapter, or indeed anywhere, the situation of a Christian being taken to court by an unbeliever or the possibility of a Christian taking an unbeliever to court. Private arbitration was, of course, a perfectly legal alternative to public litigation if the parties involved agreed, see A. H. J. Greenidge, *The Legal Procedure of Cicero's Time* (Oxford, 1901), L. Wenger, *Institutes of the Roman Law of Civil Procedure* (New York, 1940).

⁸ This seems to be the view of Dio Cassius, *History of Rome*, 61.

suppose that the ruler approves the good and punishes evil. But the passage does not *suppose* this; it *says* it quite explicitly. If the verses are taken as arguing a support for the imperatives (or in support of the ethical exhortations implied in 'do good... if you do evil'), then it is a particularly obtuse argument. In the context it is much more likely that Paul assumes that the Romans would do good and avoid the evil, and that what this argument is seeking to establish is that the rulers will approve of such action. In other words he is saying something about the rulers, as to what they approve and what they do not approve.

If we take it that verse 3 is concerned with simply describing the rulers then we should note the effect which this has on the way we take the preceding verses. The argument in verses 1 and 2 is dependent on the two statements of verse 1b, '... there is no authority except from God', and 'those that exist have been instituted by God', but these are not argued for in verse 2 which contains, rather, an implication from the premises: '... therefore he who resists the authority resists what God has appointed'. Verse 3, therefore, is most naturally to be taken as an argument in support of the second statement of verse 1b, 'the present powers are (have been) arranged by God'. In other words the 'theological' description of the powers is supported by observing what they actually do. This also explains how the second statement can be repeated in a slightly different form in verse 4a: 'He is God's minister to you for good'.

What I suggest is that this passage refers to the actual powers to which the Romans were subject, and that they should submit to these particular powers because they have been arranged by God, and this is known particularly because they operate for the good. In other words, the theological projection of verse 1 refers to the particular Roman authorities, and it is made possible because of the value judgment which is placed on their activities. I suspect that we shrink from making such theological projections and thus find it difficult to think that this is what Paul is doing here. We tend to stay at the level of making the value judgment (and justifying the ethical course of action from it) without, as it were, referring the matter to the activity of God in the situation. Paul was not so reticent; he did not separate his moral judgments from his theological judgments so much. He quite candidly, for example, tells the Thessalonians that God has chosen them, and his reason is that they received the gospel (1 Thes. 1: 4). I suspect that we would not like to make such a theological judgment about the

Thessalonians until they had Christianly fought their way to a Christian grave.

The implication of this interpretation is that it is incumbent on Christians to examine the powers that exist and seek to make a value judgment in regard to them. Do they tend to the good or not? If they do, then they should submit to them; if not, then they should not necessarily feel obliged to submit to them. This is not an argument for revolution against governments which do not tend to the good; it is an argument for non-submission. Where active opposition is demanded, the form of that opposition is still subject to the general imperatives of love that are incumbent upon a Christian.

From our standpoint in history it is apparent to us that governments are not generally wholly good, nor wholly bad. Paul, of course, was in a similar position. As he looked back over the history of the Jews or of the Mediterranean world, he could see, as well as we can, that governments generally are not wholly good, or wholly bad. In Romans 13: 1-7 he is making his theological projection in relation to the particular government that impinged on his readers and himself. If, say in AD 63, he was not able to make the same positive value judgment, then he would have to reverse his theological projection, as the book of Revelation seems in fact to do. Paul is not saying that the Roman system of government is ordained by God, but only the particular government at the time of writing. That particular government does not have to be wholly good for him to be able to say it is ordained by God. It is almost universally not the case in the Bible that people or groups of people who are said to be ordained by God are wholly good.

In a complex and inter-related world society such as we live in today the business of making such value judgments on existing authorities (which may not be simply restricted to 'political' authorities but may include ecclesiastical institutional authorities) is a difficult matter, but one which has to be undertaken with all the seriousness it demands. Mostly it is done for Christians by (Christian) leaders and public speakers, and often in a slick and superficial way. The Christian at the grass roots — least of all the theological student — cannot avoid his responsibilities so easily. It is not open to the Christian to hide behind the quite wrong idea that government *per se* and hence all governments are divinely ordained. He must understand the situation he is in, and must make a judgment on the powers as they operate, and act accordingly.