

Romans 13:1 – 14. Political non-involvement or radical submission?

On a first reading of vv1-7, and with no consideration for context, Paul appears to be advocating an acceptance of the status quo, with little room for change. Such has been the interpretation of these verses by much of the Western protestant church; that politics and faith are independent and should not be mixed; that it is not the role of the Christian to get involved with them. They have been used to justify political conservatism or political non-engagement.

However, on the same reading these things make little sense. The authorities mentioned are the same authorities that crucified Christ, and opposed his message as Paul well knew and experienced.

Paul seems to take the view that to obey is to be free (cf 1 Corinthians 7:21f). One presumes that ideas of revolution may well have been an issue of the day, as Christians tried to work out a response to their persecution. Paul argues here, as elsewhere, that a Christian response is not to take the law into our own hands; that Christians are not automatically better at making political decisions than those instituted by God. A Christian response to the institution, no matter how corrupt it is does not look like violent revolution, yet nor are we called to non-engagement. Rather we are called to trust that the God we follow works through the actions of believers and non-believers alike; through both the grass-roots nature of the church and the huge institution of the government.

I have found John Howard Yoder's 'The Politics of Jesus' particularly helpful in thinking about not only these verses, but the whole issue of a Christian response to politics. I include part of his summary of a lengthy treatment of the biblical text in question as an appendix.

As I have grappled with these verses, I have come to conclusions as to what Paul actually meant. While I know that some people at COTC are not fond of question and answers, without questions there is no dialogue. The difficulty is that while the blind leading the blind isn't helpful, gently leading people is a great challenge. The aim of the study, then, is *not* to ask questions in such a way as to procure what I believe to be the 'right answer' but rather to stimulate thought on a set of issues which I hope help in understanding the passage.

This study is a set of guidelines; a loose template. I hope you find it helpful as you study and lead the study of this passage.

Section 1: 13:1 - 7

It may be helpful to encourage homegroup members to think about the context of this passage within Romans. Summarising the previous and following chapters may be helpful.

How do you react to verses 1 – 7 as you read them. Any comments/thoughts?

Given the political climate in which Paul lived (Rome ruled; Christians were persecuted), these verses seem to be strange.

“For rulers hold no terror for those who do right”

cf Christ, perfect and crucified by the authorities.

What, or who exactly does Paul think is established by God? Is the rule of Robert Mugabe established by God? Should anyone obey him? What about dictatorships (e.g. Kym Jong-II, North Korea), communism, or democracy? Is one or all of these established by God and should we obey rulers in any of these systems?

Is Paul advocating any particular political standpoint? What is the point of these verses?

Section 2: 13:8 - 14

The second half of the chapter could be used, in part, as a response to the first half.

What does Paul mean by “waking up from your stubbornness”? Does this resonate (or not)? What does it mean to us?

Love covers everything. Discuss.

Appendix: Excerpt from John Howard Yoder's "The Politics of Jesus"

p201-202

God is not said to *create* or *institute* or *ordain* the powers that be, but only to *order* them, to put them in order, sovereignly to tell them where they belong, what is their place. It is not as if there was a time when there was no government and then God made government through a new creative intervention; there has been hierarchy and violence ever since sin has existed. Nor is it that by ordering this realm God specifically, morally approves of what a government does. The sergeant does not produce the soldiers he drills; the librarian does not create nor approve of the book she or he catalogs and shelves. Likewise God does not take the responsibility for the existence of the rebellious "powers that be" or for their shape or identity; they already are. What the text says is that God orders them, brings them into line, providentially and permissively lines them up with divine purposes.

This is true of all governments. It is a statement both *de facto* and *de jure*. It applies to the government of dictators and tyrants as well as to constitutional democracies. It would in fact apply just as well to the government of a bandit or a warlord, to the extent to which such would exercise real sovereign control.

That God orders and uses the powers does not reveal anything new about what government should be or how we should respond to government. A given government is not mandated or saved or made a channel of the will of God; it is simply lined up, used by God in the ordering of the cosmos. It does not mean that what individuals in government do is good human behavior. As we noted, the librarian does not approve of the content of a book he or she shelves; God did not approve morally of the brutality whereby Assyria chastised Israel (Isa. 10).

The immediate concrete meaning of this text for the Christian Jews in Rome, in the face of official anti-Semitism and the rising arbitrariness of the Imperial regime, is to call them away from any notion of revolution or insubordination. The call is to a nonresistant attitude toward a tyrannical government. This is the immediate and concrete meaning of the text..."