

**“Let every person be subject”:
The Contemporary Relevance of Romans 13**

Richard J. Mouw
Fuller Theological Seminary

My awakening to issues of peace and justice occurred during the civil rights movement, a process that continued to strengthen when the war in Vietnam became a matter of personal conscience. This was a difficult time for me, because the concerns that I had come to take seriously did not sit well with the evangelical Christian community that had nurtured me spiritually and theologically.

Given the highly visible influence in recent years of the Religious Right, it may be difficult for some people to imagine that there was a time, especially in the 1950s and ‘60s when evangelical Christians in North America were regularly criticized by their liberal Protestant counterparts for being “a-political.” Evangelicals have become a factor to be reckoned with in political life, as well as in the larger “culture wars” of recent years.

Whatever gains we evangelicals have achieved in our social influence, however, have not been matched by significant theological maturation on questions of political reality. Recently some evangelical leaders who were prominent in the political arena in recent years have announced that they are backing off from political involvement, in order, they say, to get back to the “real” business of the Christian life. The fact that folks can move back and forth between political involvement and a retreat from efforts at significant cultural influence suggests that the question of social activism often is decided more by mood and shifting opinion than by solid theological reflection. It is often the case that a reliance on sloganeering and the citing of

biblical “proof texts” is taken to be an adequate substitute for systematic theological exploration of important biblical themes bearing on the Christian community’s role in the larger society.

Any attempt to engage in this kind of serious reflection must focus on, among other biblical passages, the Apostle Paul’s comments about “governing authorities” in Romans 13: 1-5. His brief account of the role of the state in this passage has traditionally served as the classic text in the Christian Scriptures for discussions of the obligations of Christian citizenship:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.

I struggled much with the attempt to understand what this passage means for contemporary life during the 1960s and 1970s. As an evangelical Protestant I hold to the supreme authority of the Bible: once we decide what the Bible is telling us, the teaching must be accepted as truth. My struggles had to do with the fact that I was not convinced that the text was being interpreted correctly by American evangelicals who appealed to it in order to foster the notion of passive submission to the political status quo.

One factor that loomed large in the context of my struggle in those past decades was, as already mentioned, the divisive national debates over the legitimacy of the war in Vietnam. The question was an existential one for me, since I was personally eligible for being drafted into military service. If drafted during a time when my nation was engaged in a questionable military

campaign, should I submit? If I did enter military service, should I serve in Vietnam if that became my assignment? The importance of these questions was further reinforced by what many in my generation had recently seen at work in the civil rights movement, where Dr. King and others had made us acutely sensitive to the need to call blatantly unjust laws into question, even to the point of engaging in active disobedience to those laws.

For many members of the older generation of evangelicals—especially those in my circle of close family and friends—there really was nothing to debate. The issue was settled in their minds: as Christian citizens we were required by God to submit to the authority of our government, thus serving as good examples of law-abiding citizens. With reference to Vietnam, it was clear to them that since our government, particularly the occupants of the highest offices in the executive branch, were convinced that the war in Vietnam was a legitimate undertaking, we had no option but to support them in their policies—even if this meant answering the call directly to serve in the military operations in Southeast Asia.

Typically, this perspective, with its strong emphasis on passive submission to political authority, was reinforced by an appeal to the Romans 13 passage. And on the face of it, this made some sense. The Apostle Paul was writing in the context of the Roman empire, whose rulers Christians rightly saw, not only as pagan, but also as overtly hostile to the convictions and practices of the Christian community. Under those circumstances it is significant that the Apostle nonetheless insists that even the authority of those pagan rulers comes from God, and consequently Christian citizens must obey them. If the Apostle Paul—viewed by the early Christians, and by us present-day evangelicals as well—is seen as expressing views that are inspired by God, how can we question them? If even persons living under the authority of

ancient pagan rulers were required to submit to that authority, should less be expected of those of us who are citizens of a nation shaped by Christian teachings?

The fact is, though, that all of this takes for granted a widespread way of viewing the basic point of this Romans passage. It assumes that the primary—even the exclusive—intent of the author was to teach something about Christian submission to civil government. In this depiction political authorities are legitimized (“instituted”) by God. Whether they know it or not, the authorities are exercising power on God’s behalf. And since God’s purposes are directed toward reinforcing righteousness and countering the agents of unrighteousness, we must accept whatever government that has authority over us as “God’s servant for [our] good.”

This way of interpreting Romans 13 is, in turn, often accompanied by an appeal to two correlative theological claims. One has to do with the mysterious workings of divine providence. Since God is sovereign, and is working out his own purposes in history in his own way—the argument goes—we should not second-guess the divine will by taking it upon ourselves to decide which governments and laws are worthy of our support. The risings and fallings of governments—whether just and unjust—are matters that it is up to the Lord to monitor.

The second correlative claim posits a close connection between political authority and the ordering of the actions of sinful humanity. God loves order, the argument goes, and sinfulness promotes disorder. However much we might wish that some law or practice might be altered, we must recognize the role that governments play in keeping our sinful tendencies under control. Even a very bad government, one that nonetheless fosters an orderly pattern in human affairs, is better than what can result when human beings take it upon themselves to challenge a government’s ordering purposes.

There is an obvious problem, however, with this way of viewing things. It is simply not the case that every government that has authority over Christian citizens functions as an agent of God's righteous ordering purposes. Take the obvious case of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and '40s. Suppose Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who recoiled in horror at the actions of Hitler and his cronies—a repugnance that eventually led him to martyrdom—suppose he had read the text's application to his historical situation as follows:

Let every person be subject to the Nazi regime; for there is no authority except from God, and the authority of the Nazi regime has been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the Nazi regime resists what God has appointed, and those who resist the Nazi regime will incur judgment. The Nazi regime is not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the Nazi regime? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for the Nazi regime is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the Nazi regime does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject to it, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.

This obviously does not work. We rightly praise Bonhoeffer's active resistance to the horrors of Nazism, even as we celebrate the heroic witness of Martin Luther King and others in their refusal to submit to the racist laws of the segregated American South.

Furthermore, those examples of civil disobedience seem to conform to actual examples that we find in the ancient Scriptures, both Hebrew and Christian. During their Babylonian captivity, for example, Daniel and the men who went to the fiery furnace, insisting on fidelity to God's commands, were willing to face imprisonment and even death rather than obey an unjust law. Similarly, the Christian disciples in the book of Acts endured imprisonment for refusing to submit to mandates that they cease the proclamation of their message.

One move that Christian defenders of civil disobedience have made is to place these examples along side of Pauline teaching in a kind of dialectical tension, calling for a balancing act of sorts. We must, they say, accept both Romans 13 and Revelation 13, the latter being a passage depicting a blasphemous government, portrayed as a “beast,” claims authority over all humanity, and is obeyed by all of the citizens—except for those who are loyal to Christ (“the Lamb”). This kind of move is certainly motivated by the right kinds of concerns. But my own preference has been to go beyond a mere dialectical tension, where Romans 13 is taken to be issuing a straightforward call for Christians to obey their governments which must then be balanced off by a different sort of emphasis found in these other biblical references. Not content with a dialectical solution. I have searched for an interpretation of Romans 13 that coheres better with the other texts.

This more cohesive interpretation can be found, I propose, by first of all positing a somewhat different view of the basic point of the text than the one that sees Paul as assuming the “givenness” of a specific government as “instituted” by God. This different view understands the Pauline intent as setting forth a “normative” view of government, wherein the Apostle is describing the relationship of a Christian citizen to a *properly functioning* political authority. On this interpretation, the reason why Romans 13 should not have been taken as mandating obedience to the Nazi regime is that the Nazis were not conforming to the norms for good government as set forth in this Romans passage. The reason why Christian citizens ought to submit to the authority of a government, Paul is saying, is that God institutes governments for the purpose of being “a servant for...good.” A proper divinely-“instituted” government will not be “a terror to good conduct, but [rather] to bad [conduct].” When we are given such a government, we can do “what is good, and [we] will receive its approval.” But when we are faced with a

government that does the opposite of what Romans 13 describes—a government that rewards those who do evil and punishes those who do good—then we must not honor that government as God-ordained. The problem with the Nazi regime, then, was that it was not conforming to the standards that inform God’s purposes in “instituting” political authority. In that case, it was not Bonhoeffer who was violating the norms set forth Romans 13—it was the Nazi regime!

It is an interesting exercise to apply this normative interpretation to contemporary democratic contexts. The call to submit passively to governing authorities often presupposes a picture of governance that is more appropriate for a monarchy than for a democratic republic. In the American system, with its three branches of government, political authority in fact is distributed into a constitutional system of checks and balances. So, when President Nixon and his advisors, during the Watergate proceedings, refused to comply with orders from both congressional committees and the courts to hand over certain records they were not respecting the patterns of authority. In that case it was the executive branch of government that was failing to live up to the mandate of Romans 13.

Even more basic: in a democratic system such as we find it in the United States, political authority resides primarily with the people, who then—in accordance with constitutional norms—delegate that authority to elected officials. In such a system it is always appropriate for citizens to ask—indeed it is a responsibility of good citizenship—whether the authority that has been delegated to elected officials is being properly exercised. For Christian citizens, then, to refuse actively to assess and debate official policies and practices is in effect a refusal to submit to the governing authorities—namely, to our constitutional system of checks and balances that is subject to ongoing citizen review.

All of this comports well with the tone of yet another major passage about political authority in the apostolic writings, I Peter 2: 11-17:

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge. For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

Here the emphasis on doing what is right clearly refers to something more than simply submitting to political authority. Christian citizens must be sure to perform the sort of "honorable deeds" that glorify God, even when those deeds may cause others to "malign [them] as evildoers." And while accepting human authority as legitimate, they are nonetheless urged to show the "honor" not only to "the emperor," but also to "everyone," to all human beings.

The fact that the Apostle Peter here addresses his Christian audience as "aliens and exiles" suggests an allusion to an important passage in the Hebrew Scriptures. In Jeremiah 29, the prophet brings a new charter to the Israelites who have been carried off into Babylonian exile. In this new context they have no temple in which to worship, nor are they living in a social setting where obedience to the direct commands of God is encouraged by godly rulers. In this set of circumstances the prophet instructs them to "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do

not decrease.” And this important directive: “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

(29: 5-7)

I am convinced that the apostolic word in Romans 13 is in harmony with this more ancient mandate to work actively for the welfare, the *shalom*, of the societies in which we are called to live out our patterns of obedience to the God who is the source of all human authority.