

Romans 13:1-7**Submission to the Authorities**

It seems that authorities are a necessary part of human existence. At the same time power, in our fallen world, is easily abused. As Christians we look to Jesus who taught and lived out a servant model of leadership, which turned upside down worldly models of power (Mark 10:42-45).

We are living in a time where authorities are deeply distrusted, be they teachers, parents, politicians, religious leaders, nhs staff, the media, police, the judiciary or academics. And in one sense we can see why. Just about every area has been hit with one scandal or another over the last few years involving abuse, deceit or failure. But in general the Bible teaches that God has set in place authorities for the ordering of the church and society (Daniel 2:21). We are to be subject to these authorities *for the Lord's sake* (1Peter 2:13-14) *The king heart is in the hand of the LORD* (Proverbs 21:1) and this is the reason we need to pray for all those in positions of authority, who often have challenging and very difficult jobs to do (1Timothy 2:1-3).

Jesus taught we should render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's (Matthew 22:21). Our submission to human institutions comes out of reverence for Christ since we recognise that Jesus is Lord of all. The Christian life is a life of submission to Jesus, who Himself submitted to His heavenly Father and was obedient even unto death (Philippians 2:8). The truth is that we either submit to Jesus as Lord or we submit to something or someone else – there is no neutral ground (Romans 6:16).

This idea of submission to authorities as unto the Lord is the basis of Paul's teaching in Ephesians 6:1-8. This is helpful since it shows how Christian faith shapes relationships of power for good. Children are to learn to obey the Lord early on by being taught to obey their parents, which is the 5th commandment. Slaves are to *render service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man*, and masters are to *stop threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with him*. We do not use these verses in any way as an endorsement of slavery, but recognise they were practical advice to Christian households which had Christian slaves. We can apply these verses today to the relationship of power between employer and employee.

All this is just an introduction to Romans 13:1-7 where the same ideas are kicking around.

Romans 13:1-2 *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.*

There is a classic story in Scripture of someone who resisted the authorities instituted by God, and he and his 250 associates paid dearly. His name was Korah, and the incident is called Korah's rebellion (Numbers 16). Korah had a grievance against Moses. He resented the appointment of Aaron (Moses' brother) and his sons to the priesthood. He accused Moses and Aaron of abusing their positions of power, and of exalting themselves over the congregation of the Lord. But his real motive was for a power grab and to take over the priesthood for himself. His rebellion against the authorities God had established was rooted in pride and it surfaced when things were not going well for Israel. Moses picked up on this rebellious spirit very quickly and said, *it is against the LORD that you and all your company have gathered together* (Numbers 16:11). The story has an unhappy ending because Korah and his associates incurred judgment: the earth opened up and all the rebels

were swallowed up into the depths of the earth. Then in Numbers 17 we have the story of the budding of Aaron's staff, which was a miracle from God that proved that the Aaronic priesthood had been divinely ordained by God. This finally put a stop to all the grumbling. The budding of Aaron's staff also indicates that fruitfulness comes when we do things God's way. But those with a rebellious spirit will only ever produce thorns and thistles.

It seems to me that at least some of the believing Gentiles in Rome were being tempted to resist the authorities God has established, although I'd say not on the scale of Korah. Paul clearly felt the need to address those who, on this issue, had become a bit proud and arrogant.

But who are these authorities? It is usually understood that Paul is speaking about the secular Romans authorities. But there are some peculiarities with this passage.

First, how does this passage fit in with the rest of Romans? Some think it doesn't fit in well at all: "Here I must admit that I am unable to find particular reasons in the Romans situation for Paul's inclusion of this teaching."¹ Others don't think it fits at all and consider Romans 13:1-7 to be, "a self-contained envelope completely independent of the context."² In other words this commentator thinks 13:1-7 was added later, for some unexplained reason. How is it that Paul seems to go off on a tangent at 13:1, only to return to this main theme of love within the community in 13:8?

Second, the authorities are called God's servants (13:4) and ministers of God (13:6). Paul was writing during the reign of Nero, whose reign is remembered as one of tyranny. Is Paul really calling the likes of Nero (Hitler?) *ministers of God*? This is at odds with the book of Revelation which reveals Rome to be underpinned by a demonic force that opposes God and the followers of Jesus.

Third, Christian commentators nearly always feel the need to qualify Paul's teaching in Romans 13:1-7, but Paul himself doesn't. In the Bible as a whole we do not see such unqualified submission to secular authorities as Paul seems to teach in 13:1-7. Indeed in Acts the Apostles say, *We must obey God rather than men* (Acts 5:29). Kent Hughes says in his commentary on 13:1-7, "Our conclusion is this: a Christian *must disobey* his government when it asks him to, 1) violate a commandment of God; 2) commit an immoral or unethical act; or 3) go against his Christian conscience which is informed by Scripture and is in submission to the Spirit of God."³ But why didn't Paul qualify his teaching?

Just about every commentator recognises the *peculiarities* of this passage, but none offer a satisfactory solution. However in 1996 Mark Nanos offered a radical (though still minority) solution which makes the passage fit in with the rest of Romans.⁴ He suggested that the authorities in Romans 13 are not the secular authorities of Rome, but the synagogue authorities of Rome. This interpretation is very interesting and is worthy of consideration.

The powers that be in 13:1-7 are called authorities (v1,2), rulers (v3), God's servants (v4) and God's ministers (v6). These were all terms used for leadership in the synagogues: *authorities* (Luke, 12:11) *rulers* (e.g. Luke 12:11, 23:13,35; Acts 4:5,8) (NB authorities and rulers can also be secular

¹ J.C. O'Neill in *Paul's letter to the Romans*

² Kallas

³ Hughes, Kent in *Romans, Preaching the Word series* p242

⁴ Nanos, M *Romans*

authorities). The commentator John Lightfoot says, "There was 'the public *minister* of the synagogue,' who prayed publicly, and took care about the reading of the law, and sometimes preached." Lightfoot says that Jesus would have been given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah by the *minister* of the synagogue (Luke 4:17) He says, "There were also three deacons (*servants*), or almoners, on whom was the care of the poor."

It is interesting to note that when Peter speaks of submission to human institutions he uses the language of *king* and *governor*, which clearly is a reference to secular authorities (1Peter 2:23). But Paul uses different language. The idea that Paul has synagogue authorities in view fits well with the historical situation in Rome at the time, before separation of synagogue and church. Paul had instructed the Gentile Christians in *do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you* (Romans 11:18). Now in the chapter 13 he gives very practical advice how the Gentiles were to live out and witness to their new found faith in Jesus in the context in which they found themselves.

But did the synagogues have the authority to discipline and collect taxes? Yes! They had special privileges from the Roman government which included the right to discipline those within their community, and to collect and distribute taxes. Paul himself was disciplined by the Jewish authorities many times (2Cor 11:24-25).

However we might wonder if Paul would really counsel submission to the authorities who masterminded the death of Jesus. I think so, as Jesus also always taught submission to Jewish authorities: *So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach* (Matthew 23:3). Furthermore, in general, in the wider Empire, the synagogues were sympathetic to those they considered to be "righteous Gentiles".

What might this mean for us? Our confession of faith that Jesus is Lord always has to be worked out in real human relationships.

In wider society the spirit of Korah is alive and well – it is a spirit of rage, as we have seen demonstrated this week. The problem is that the spirit of Korah is also in the church. Protestants are prone to saying, "I'm only accountable to God!" But this strong independent spirit is the reason the Protestant church has split into so many denominations.

At a time we are facing a major crisis in authority in society at large I believe it is for us to model the teaching of the Bible in this matter of submission in our families and in our churches and denominations. Whoever we are we all find ourselves in positions whereby we have to exercise and be submissive to power. Let's live our lives as those who are servants of the Lord.

In regard to secular authorities, we should be good citizens, cooperating and praying for authorities. But this doesn't mean blind compliance. There is a vital place for the true prophetic voice of the word of God in society that challenges authority, and it for this we should pray.

