

How Should We Understand Paul's Relationship to the State?

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Introduction

My assignment this afternoon is to bring our conversation on the role of the modern State and war into dialogue with the first century apostle Paul. Given this starting point I want to commend the apostle's words to us all, 'May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience' (Col 1.11). I commend this endurance to you all because I have been given the unenviable end-of-the-afternoon slot, which may mean that you will need all the endurance and patience on offer.

From this epistle the author goes on to say, 'giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints of the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption... for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him' (Col 1.12ff).

We have here a way of seeing the world through totally different eyes: what was the 'power of darkness' that God has rescued us from, who are the 'saints of the light,' why are the 'rulers and powers' described as being both 'visible and invisible,' and how do all these things centre on the person of Christ? By the end of this talk I hope we will have learnt to appreciate that Paul's understanding of power and authority, of freedom and liberation, of peace and war, operate on a landscape that is very different to our own modern co-ordinates of reality, but, no less relevant.

The one other time that I attended an APF gathering was when the topic was focused on the contemporary significance of ANZAC commemorations. The sacred character that is imbued in the events and rhetoric of ANZAC seems to be rekindling a sense of national identity. I particularly remember how Allan Davidson portrayed the salient interrelationship between Christian and military symbolism displayed on memorials throughout this country. The image of battle arms and soldiers being interspersed with the symbol of the cross or with heavenly angels, all giving a sense of sacred and divine approval for the sacrifices

made during war. This enshrines the notion that there is no higher honour or sacrifice than to fight for God's own empire. This is typified in my own church in Dunedin, where a stained-glass window depicts Jesus as King bestowing his eternal rest on a faithful soldier who is still dressed in full battle garb and carrying his gun ready to fight for king and country.

The historical record of how churches across New Zealand sought to produce patriotic citizens intent on proving their loyalty to God and Empire was only paralleled by the same efforts in Germany. The threat to England's honour led the Anglican Archbishop of New Zealand, Alfred Averill, to this summons before his Synod: "God calls us to fight his battle for liberty, justice, mercy, truth, and we will send the answer back to heaven: by God's grace we will." Averill went on to paint a vision for a unified British Empire as the brotherhood of people made possible by the fatherhood of God. Churches became virtual recruiting stations across New Zealand, exemplified by the Presbyterian minister James Gibb who used five sermons to explain the message of the Allies and appeal for recruits. Gibb's appealed to a "higher patriotism" exemplified by none other than Jesus himself. The national conference of Methodists stated in their resolution: "We regard the British Empire, with all its defects, as being, in practical righteousness, the largest installment of the Kingdom of God that has yet arisen among men..."¹

The jingoistic rhetoric of the churches was welcomed by the New Zealand government who used their unquestioned authority to suppress all dissident voices. Those who opposed the war by not complying with conscription, or those who spoke out for peace, after having lost their basic civil liberties were sent to serve jail time doing hard labour for the duration of the

¹ These examples, and many others, can be found in Peter Lineham, "The Religious Face of Patriotism," in *Kia Kaha: New Zealand in the Second World War*, ed. John Crawford, 199-220 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); idem, "First World War Religion," in *New Zealand's Great War: New Zealand, the Allies and the First World War*, ed. John Crawford and Ian McGibbon, 467- 92 (Auckland: Exisle Publishing Ltd., 2007); Allan Davidson, "New Zealand Churches and Death in the First World War," in *New Zealand's Great War*, ed. John Crawford and Ian McGibbon, 447-66 (Auckland: Exisle Publishing Ltd., 2007).

war. Many of those imprisoned were pacifist Christians who lost the support of their churches because they failed to give allegiance to the Empire.²

Yet the mainline churches did not enjoy the kind of revival they had been expecting once the war had ended. In fact, as Davidson has pointed out, by using the language of “ultimate sacrifice” for the cause of the state the church had allowed its theology to become co-opted.³ Simply put; if the State was the vehicle for God’s kingdom then why should there be any need for the church? The church quickly realised that it needed to have a more critical response to the demands of state loyalty if it was to reclaim its prophetic voice in the face of earthly powers.

This would be a particularly difficult task for New Testament exegetes, because during the war both sides had made use of biblical texts that made the State an agent of God’s divine will. As Victoria Barnett points out in her study of the church resistance movements in Germany: “For those who weren’t Nazis, the habits of complicity grew by degrees; its roots were in the tangled web of fear, nationalism, political naivete, *and traditional subservience to the state.*”⁴ This traditional subservience derived from a particular reading of biblical texts most often attributed to the apostle Paul.

In what follows I want to quickly take you through the dominant trends for interpreting Paul’s relationship to the State. In particular I want to focus on the developments of the past two decades that has tended to cast Paul as a counter-imperial revolutionary intent on overthrowing the Roman empire along with its ideology of domination. Not only is this recent development interesting because of its stark contrast with the apostle who gave divine legitimacy to the authorities of the World Wars, but this Paul also appears to pose

² Cf. Russell Campbell, DVD production, “Sedition: the suppression of dissent in World War II New Zealand,” (Wellington: Vanguard Films, 2005); David Grant, *Out in the Cold: Pacifists and Conscientious Objectors in New Zealand during World War II* (Auckland, NZ: Reed Methuen Publishers, 1986).

³ Davidson, “New Zealand Churches and Death in the First World War,” in *New Zealand’s Great War*, ed. Crawford and McGibbon, 466.

⁴ Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest against Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 180.

some fresh questions to our contemporary postcolonial world of imperial and global power relations. Yet despite the obvious appeal of this ancient Che Guevara I believe it necessary to question this portrait of Paul based on my opening comments about the very different world that Paul seems to inhabit?

Survey of approaches

Traditional Interpretation

The traditional interpretation of the state being able to claim complete obedience from its citizens because of its divine status was fostered on a particular reading of Romans 13.1-7. It is because of this one short text that the apostle Paul has gained the reputation of being “an almost servile, uncritical servant of the State... be it never so totalitarian.”⁵ One NT scholar described the problem in no uncertain terms:

These seven verses have caused more unhappiness and misery in the Christian East and West than any other seven verses in the New Testament by the license they have given to tyrants, and the support for tyrants the Church has felt called on to offer as a result of the presence of Romans 13 in the canon.⁶

The problem it seemed was that Paul’s statements required the view that the State was divine by nature simply by virtue of having authority. Whoever happened to be sitting in the highest seat of the land must have been providentially put there by God. Therefore to question the State was synonymous with questioning God’s authority. In regards to the Just War tradition the mark of possessing “just authority” came to be the only criteria that really mattered when waging war. As alluded to before this nurtured the idea that there was no higher calling than to fight and die in the name of God’s divinely ordained authority.

⁵ Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1957), 55.

⁶ J. C. O’Neill, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Harmondsworth, 1975), 209.

Two challenges to this way of reading Paul emerged after the Second World War. First, there arose a greater appreciation for Paul's eschatological worldview, which located the State as belonging to the world that was passing away. Second, submission to the State was counter-balanced by the recognition that Scripture also provided warrant for civil disobedience. I will quickly treat each of these in turn.

The Jewish eschatological hope of the everlasting reign of God's kingdom was thought to bring about an end to pagan rule as once and for all God would take up his seat as judge of the nations. Anticipation of this long-awaited reign reached fever pitch in the years preceding Jesus' birth. Various political factions emerged each espousing their own ideas about how God would bring about his rule. The Jesus movement was considered one such faction except for their unique belief that God's kingdom had already arrived in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The death and resurrection of Jesus was for these followers a vindication that the end-time rule of God had actually arrived. For believers the world as it now stood is marked by two ages: the age before Christ, and the new age of God's kingdom. These two ages overlap in the present, but it is clear to this believing community that they are destined for the age inaugurated by Jesus.

The issue of Paul's view of the State came to be interpreted against this eschatological backdrop. It was argued that, for Paul, the State belongs to the age before Christ, and thus is part of the world that is passing away. Paul did not consider the State as having any lasting, final, or even divine significance; rather, it is merely a temporal, penultimate institution that will vanish as soon as the kingdom of God comes in fullness. "Accordingly Jesus' disciples have both the right and the duty to judge the State on the basis of their knowledge of the coming Kingdom and of the will of God."⁷ Interestingly, some scholars pointed to how the State operates according to the "judicial principle of the retribution of

⁷ Cullmann, *State in the New Testament*, 50-51.

evil”⁸ (Rom 13.4) as precisely the sign that the State is totally unlike the new age to come, which is marked by love of one another and the power of forgiveness (cf. Rom 12.17).

An important caveat was attached to this interpretation in case disciples thought that they *in principle* should oppose the State. For the State clearly does belong to the present age where the new and the old overlap, and this present time is ordained by God. So, while the State has no lasting or divine significance – and should not be accorded such authority – it does exercise *limited authority* in this intermediary time. This is why Paul urges the Christians in Rome to submit to the authority that God has ordained, and why they should dutifully pay their taxes (Rom 13.7-8). To revolt against the State out of principle would not only constitute a rejection of God’s intermediary purpose for the world, but it would also fall into that confusion where God’s kingdom was conflated with the sphere of statecraft.⁹

And yet – and this relates to the second challenge posed to the traditional interpretation – the State repeatedly oversteps the limited role given it by God and instead forges an identity independent of God; absolutising and deifying itself. This portrayal of the State is central to the author of the book of Revelations, which occasioned the popular thesis and anti-thesis of Rom 13 – Rev 13. Paul was arguably not unaware of this idolatrous tendency, which is why the careful interpreter will recognize that Paul’s cosmology was pervaded by powers that stand behind and animate their earthly counterparts. Paul believed that these “principalities and powers” had been subjected to Christ, but they still had the potential to become demonic and self-serving. Where the State considers its authority as absolute, or where it demanded the worship of its subjects, then Paul would supposedly point to the demonic power that stands behind such a State.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid., 57-58.

⁹ Cullmann argued that this theocratic conflation of the State and the kingdom of God was precisely the error of the Zealot movement, of which Jesus clearly disassociated himself from (Mk 12.17; Matt 11.12; Lk 16.16; Jn 6.16, 10.8), Ibid., 9-23.

¹⁰ Ibid., 70; Cyril H. Powell, *The Biblical Concept of Power* (Great Britain: Epworth Press, 1963), 175; J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

While this understanding of the State was by no means ubiquitous across the discipline of Pauline studies it perhaps did the most to pry Christians free from the view of traditional subservience to an authority that was considered divine by nature. To recap, Paul was not interpreted as being opposed to the State in principle, nor was there any identified potential reasons for why Paul might have opposed the Roman authorities. Paul's view of the State was still divinely ordained by God, and for this reason he urges Christians to submit themselves to the authorities, which is a way of securing peace for their neighbours and the potential for Christian salvation. This view of the state is largely determined by a reading of Romans 13.1-7, which also contains within it the possibility for civil disobedience if the State should go beyond its God ordained limits. The point at which Christians should not comply with the State is when earthly rulers demand worship. These authors did not imply that worship of the Roman state was an issue for Paul or for his contemporaries. Paul's imprisonments and beatings were apparently the result of misunderstandings as to Paul's message, which was concerned with theological truth rather than political change.

Yet this scholarship is not without its problems. In this interpretation the State largely appears as a secular institution concerned with the outward conditions of peace and order, which supposedly did not conflict with Paul's more religious and theological concerns. The inescapable dualism between religion and politics during this period is more reflective of a post-Enlightenment worldview than a first-century one. There lacks any analysis of the socio-political consequence of Paul's gospel, particularly against the horizon of the ideology of Roman imperial notions of power, peace and security. All of which allows for a more optimistic view of the State and a spiritualisation of Paul's gospel. Theologians were thus able to fiercely debate Paul's doctrine of justification, or Paul's conflict with the Jewish factions, and all the while their contemporaries still managed to further their imperial propaganda unimpeded by this "Paul."

Post-Holocaust Developments

The 1980's and early 90's saw a significant turn in Pauline scholarship. The pressing agenda was set by the devastating knowledge of the Holocaust and the anti-Semitic prejudices that fuelled those atrocities. Paul, as the original and greatest Christian theologian, came under increasing attack for spurning this anti-Semitic heritage.¹¹ There was thus not a great deal of attention given to Paul's relationship to the State during this period. Some new interpretations of texts like Rom 13 did arise out of historical critical research. Notable among these was the recognition of extortionary taxes mentioned by Tacitus, which may well have caused some civil unrest in Rome and thereby occasioned Paul's *paraenesis* to the Roman Christians to not arouse suspicion and potential persecution of the Jewish and Christian community's.¹²

Yet while most Pauline scholars were consumed with the task of interpreting Paul against his Jewish background – which was no longer viewed as a religion of legalistic “works-righteousness” – rather than the larger Greco-Roman world, this period of history also saw an increasing prominence given to issues of power, imperialism, colonialism, revolution, and liberation. These new developments were given voice by second wave feminists, Latin American and Black liberationists, two-thirds world and post-colonial intellectuals, and a host of other advocacy academics. It was not long before these new developments occasioned a new generation of Pauline scholarship that tried to develop a distinctively Christian response to the desire for liberation and resistance among oppressed and colonised peoples who had long suffered under the power of imperialism.

¹¹ See particularly the “paradigm shift” occasioned by E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); which was picked up and spurned what has been called the “new perspective of Paul.”

¹² See V. P. Furnish, “Christians and the Governing Authorities,” in *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues*, 1986; James D. G. Dunn, “Romans 13.1-7 – A Charter for Political Quietism?” *Ex Auditu* (1986): 55-68; Winsome Munro, “Romans 13:1-7, Apartheid's Last Biblical Refuge,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 20:4 (1990): 161-68; James I. H. McDonald, “Romans 13. 1-7 and Christian Social Ethics Today,” *The Modern Churchman* 29:2 (1987): 19-25. For a discussion of Tacitus' mention of the tax unrest in *Annals*, 13.50, see J. Friedrich, W. Pohlmann and P. Stuhlmacher, “Zur historischen Situation und Intention von Rom. 13.1-7,” *Zeitschrift fur Theologie und Kirche* 73 (1976), 157ff.

Counter-Imperial Paul

A marked feature of the traditional view of the State was the benign quality of Roman rule. A prominent conservative biblical scholar like C. E. B. Cranfield could maintain that Paul viewed the Roman state as providing the “outward conditions under which the Gospel may be preached to all and sundry without hindrance.” The Roman state was there to promote “peace and quiet among men... conducive to men’s salvation,” and thus it is a Christian duty to render service to the State as an “integral part of our debt of love to our neighbours.”¹³ It was believed that the early church was able to flourish because of the peaceable conditions of the *Pax Romana*, and because the Roman state was essentially disinterested in the growth of this new religious movement. Both of these assumptions have come under increasing attack in light of recent classical studies.

The *Pax Romana*, or the peace of Rome, was established by Augustus (a name given him by the Roman senate meaning “revered one,” “honoured by the gods”), after bringing order out of the chaos of civil war, which ended in the battle of Actium in 31 B.C.E. Augustus ruled until 14 A.D. and was perhaps the most innovative and influential reformer of the Roman empire. Under his reign there was a renewal of traditional morality, the old Roman religions were reinvigorated, and the *imperium Romana* became a unified world rather than simply a collection of provinces. All of this marked what was called the “Golden Age” of Rome’s history.

Yet Rome was an “imperialy orientated military society,” which meant that if Augustus were to revive Rome’s traditional morality then he would have to do it on the basis of conquest and war.¹⁴ The conquering of foreign lands was considered the moral duty of the

¹³ C. E. B. Cranfield, “The Christian’s Political Responsibility According to the New Testament,” *SJT* 15 (1962): 179-80.

¹⁴ Horsley, “Introduction: Krister Stendahl’s Challenge to Pauline Studies,” in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. R. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 18. Klaus Wengst’s concludes that “the Pax Romana is a peace which is the political goal of the Roman emperor and his most senior officials and is brought about and secured by military action through the success of his legions.” Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 1987), 11.

better nation.¹⁵ Therefore, while the Romans viewed Augustus as a “Saviour,” the “Prince of Peace,” and even a “son of god,” those conquered by the emperor suffered terrible loss and the life-long fate of slavery. We see this most clearly in the instrument of crucifixion, which as one commentator has put it, served as “a means of waging war and securing peace, of wearing down rebellious cities under siege, of breaking the will of conquered peoples and of bringing mutinous troops or unruly provinces under control.”¹⁶

Any non-citizen who would threaten the Roman *pax* faced the consequence of a shameful death by crucifixion. For example, there was the crucifixion of six thousand followers of the slave rebel Spartacus in 71 B.C.E. There is also Josephus’ account of the crucifixion of tens of thousands of Jews during Rome’s reign starting from 63 B.C.E. till Titus’ subsequent siege when he crucified as many as five hundred refugees from the city per day.¹⁷ In short, the peace of Rome, came at the price of a violent end for anyone who did not support Rome.

It is not difficult to draw similarities with the imperialism of our recent history. Cast as a response to the threats of 9/11, President George W. Bush’s National Security Strategy was premised on the vision of the “New American Century,” a century of “*pax Americana*.”¹⁸ These were the actual terms used in the document. While this vision for the peace of America might sound promising to those who have the most to benefit from it, to those who question the global hegemony of the USA, made explicit through its economic and military “superpower” status, this is probably not much more than an unambiguous echo of the arrogance of Roman imperial propaganda.

¹⁵ As described by Stoic philosophers Posidonius and Livy, noted by Horsley, “Introduction,” in *Paul and Empire*, 18.

¹⁶ Neil Elliot, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 94.

¹⁷ Josephus, *War*. 2:5:1-3; 2:13:2, 5:11:1-2.

¹⁸ See, Gary J. Dorrien, *Imperial Designs: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana* (New York: Routledge, 2004), cited in David J. Lull, “Review Essay: Paul and Empire,” *Religious Studies Review* 36:4 (2010): 253.

While subjugation under the might of the Roman military represented one form of imperial power, the more pervasive form of power that marked the Greek cities of Paul's mission came through the medium of the emperor cult. The emperor was able to exert control over a vast empire by a propaganda campaign involving the provincial elite. It was the local aristocrats and authorities – like the Herodians of Jesus' time – who had the most to gain or lose in the *Pax Romana*. They aligned themselves with the empire by becoming the imperial clients and principal sponsors of a cult dedicated to Roman political ideology.

Imperial power was thus able to penetrate and take over local culture in the form of civil religion.¹⁹ So intoxicating was the propaganda of this imperial cult that some commentators have described it as like the Christmas season in the United States, only that it never ended. Again we could point out the contemporary similarities of how the capitalist manifesto has so consumed our lives and made us worship the dollar at the expense of local forms of community and truthful worship.

So either Paul went around the Eastern Mediterranean world blindfolded to these realities of power, in which case we would have to ask how complicit he was in endorsing this system, or it is us as interpreters of Paul who have become blinded to Paul's actual intentions in relation to this imperial superpower. Not surprisingly an influential coalition of scholars have argued that the problem is us – academics! But not only academics, in fact, the problem stretches as far back as to Paul's first interpreters, who are also included in the NT.

The tendency to spiritualise Paul and leave questions of power up to the State, it is argued, can be seen in the epistles written not by Paul but by those who wanted to sabotage Paul's explicit goal of opposing the Roman empire. The influence of the pseudo-Paulines have meant that we are left without the means through which to address issues of political-economic domination and racial and gender inequality and injustice.²⁰ It is also argued that

¹⁹ Horsley, "Introduction," in *Paul and Empire*, 11.

²⁰ Elliot, *Liberating Paul*, 29-30; Horsley, "Introduction," in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation: Essays in Honour of Krister Stendahl* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 12.

to interpret Paul over against Judaism, presenting him as some kind of universalistic theologian as opposed to the ethnocentric particularism of Judaism, only increases our blindedness and further entrenches the imperialistic idea of Christianity that has so devastated both the East and the West.²¹

To get over this blindfold we are told that we need to first recognize that in the first century what we know as ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ were inseparable. As I mentioned previously about the imperial cult, such cults prayed to the imperial household and worshiped the emperor as a god in exchange for imperial honours and fiscal benefits. Roman religion was as much about securing the cohesiveness of Roman rule as it was about administering justice.

Therefore when Paul uses the language of *ekklesia*, *euangelion*, *pistis*, *dikaiosyne*, *eirene*, and *kyrios*, some interpreters argue that he was laying down a direct challenge to the Roman political ideology of the day. Paul was establishing *ekklesiai* (“churches,” assemblies) that were meant to challenge the authority of the established *ekklesiai* of the city, thus creating an alternative society. Paul went around proclaiming the *euangelion* (gospel) of Jesus as the true *soter* (saviour), as opposed to the *euangelion* of Caesar’s *soteria* already affected by Augustus and his successors. The *eirene* (peace) brought by Christ who is also *kyrios* (Lord), would have been heard as a direct challenge to the *pax Romana* and *dikaiosyne* (justice) of the Roman *kyrios*.

Once these associations with Roman political theology are recognised it is argued that Paul must have been “presenting his gospel as a direct competitor of the gospel of Caesar.”²² But for fear of persecution he could not do this openly. Paul’s gospel is thereby couched in code-words and hidden transcripts that would have evoked echoes in the ears of his readers. Once we recover the landscape of Roman imperialism we too will notice all these echoes and will at last recognize that Paul really did intend to counteract the Roman empire with

²¹ Neil Elliot, “Paul and the Politics of Empire: Problems and Prospects,” in *Paul and Politics*, 19-22.

²² Horsley, “Introduction,” in *Paul and Empire*, 140

the empire established by Jesus. Thus, texts like Rom 13 are treated by some members of this counter-imperial coalition as a form of ironic satire, mocking the pretensions of Roman propaganda. Yet others read this text as a sign that Paul still occasionally slipped back into a complicit relationship between subject and ruler, but that this was not definitive of his actual intentions.

The import of this radical counter-imperial revolutionary would devastate any remnant traditional interpretation of Paul. For it goes beyond the declaration that there are some political implications to Paul's theology, and instead declares that the driving heart of Paul's mission was to oppose the ideology of imperialism – in all its forms. Some authors would argue that it is wrong to think that there is something called theology in Paul's letters, unless by that term we mean a political program for creating an alternative society that stands in opposition to the society of Caesar. We have a hint here of why many of these scholars have very little interest in the modern day church or in its theology, which are treated at best as a confusion of Paul's intentions. And interestingly this scholarship offers very little by way of a commitment to nonviolent enemy love. Indeed, some of its leading advocates argue that Paul and Jesus only commended nonviolence towards fellow villagers, who presumably shared the same oppressed plight under the Roman regime. Yet no such commitment to nonviolence was extended to the Roman elite.²³ Yet it would be wrong to portray this coalition as representing a unified voice over these kinds of issues.

There is obviously some broad appeal to the portrait of a counter-imperial apostle, not least because, as one commentator has pointed out, there are direct implications for relating “Paul to social and political issues in [our] newly ‘post-secular’ world, in contrast to the individualised (or privatised) readings common in theologically conservative traditions.”²⁴ In this sense the reading of Paul just offered is entirely on cue in how it treats religious and

²³ See Horsley, “Ethics and Exegesis: ‘love your enemies’ and the doctrine of nonviolence,” in *Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, ed. Williard M. Swartley, 72-101 (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992); and John D. Crossan’s mention of pacifism in, “Paul and Rome: The Challenge of a Just World Order,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 59:3-4 (2005): 6-20.

²⁴ John M. Barclay, *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 367.

political concerns as one in the same. One could not be religious in Paul's day without that being interpreted politically, and one could not be political without the endowment of divine agency and the worship of citizens.

It has therefore been poignant to point out the religio-political challenges faced by the early Christian movement, not least by the emperor cult as one of the fastest growing religious movements in the first century. Refusal to participate in the Roman religious system directly implied a diminution of Caesar's authority by making him into no more than just another man. This counter-imperial interpretation of Paul is also correct I believe in arguing that God's apostle was neither unaware nor unconcerned with the imperial machinations that flowed from the emperor's household. One need only point out that Paul suffered the rule of Rome in his very body through punishment, imprisonment, and potentially martyrdom.

Yet before we rush to endorse this political program we need to stand back and ask some questions about this portrait of Paul. Reading Roman imperialism through our contemporary postcolonial sensibilities we will no doubt want to find a Paul that corresponds to our own politics. Yet in the attempt to make Paul 'politically relevant' we may unwittingly make Paul after our own image, and thereby strip him of his distinctive political vision. We must thereby ask how Paul himself saw his world?

Church's politics of peace and the witness to the State

One significant reason to doubt that Paul directly intended to oppose Rome's Caesar is that Paul is conspicuously silent about naming Roman power. Paul never singles out the imperial cult or any other deity associated with Rome, he never accords significance to anything Roman as specifically *Roman* (as in the cities he visited, or his own citizenship), he never refers to Roman governors or the emperor by name, he does not describe the instrument of crucifixion as specifically Roman, and he doesn't even attribute his own imprisonments to the Roman authorities.

We could conclude that Paul was forced to use code language so as to hide the target of his criticism, except that Paul blatantly puts forth his gospel with no fear or shame, so are we to

conclude that on this matter he was afraid? Judging from other first century Jewish authors who openly criticized the Roman empire for its military exploits and idolatrous fallacy are we to conclude that Paul was afraid to do the same?²⁵ This early Jewish-Christian movement was by no means unique in its critique of empire; as a Jew, Paul's views on idolatry and pagan rule would have been widely known, and the Caesars already extended tolerance towards the Jews because of these particular convictions. Can we also really believe that the Roman State had some secret police that pursued and scrutinised private letters circulating around a minority movement of an even more minority people? I doubt it.

Even still, Paul's silence in naming the rulers of his day is highly unusual given his many interactions with Roman power. It would be like a Dietrich Bonhoeffer who never mentions the Third Reich, Hitler or the Nazi regime; or a Daniel Berrigan who never mentions America, the US Administration, or the President. I believe that this silence should make us tune in more carefully to the language that Paul does in fact use. What we will find is that the way Paul sees and describes the world around him is markedly different from our own modern ways of describing the world?

Paul's vision of reality is apocalyptic, by which I mean that the Christ event has ushered in an entirely new reality that is in deep conflict with the old reality. One commentator describes this by saying that Jesus' appearance on the human landscape is a sign that God is actively invading the creation enslaved to Sin.²⁶ It is a sign that the Jewish hope for the end-time rule of God has finally come. This is what justification is all about; God has come to put the world to rights. Yet the results of God's appearance on the human landscape are entirely unpredictable. Instead of ruling like a King and sending His messiah in to destroy

²⁵ For example Philo addressed a wide audience declaring that Caesar is neither God nor a son of God, and this directed more or less to the emperor's face (*Legatio*). Josephus castigated the imperial cult as 'a means that is useful neither to God nor to human beings,' and he described the Roman governors as being responsible for miscarriages of justice (*contra Apionem*). Titus, at the heart of the Roman establishment, can say that the empire consists of 'plundering, butchering and stealing' in the name of 'peace' (*Agricola*). See Barclay, *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews*, 381-82.

²⁶ See J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).

Israel's enemies, God appears in weakness and ends up suffering a brutal death at the hands of the very people he supposedly came to save.

In receiving his apostolic calling the Pharisaic Jew from Tarsus, the zealot who tried to suppress the Christian movement, had his epistemology fundamentally transformed. In his own words, he came to see the world 'not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit' (cf. 2 Cor 5.16-17). To view the world through eyes opened by the Spirit is to understand that God's strength might just be displayed in human weakness. It is to understand that Jesus' suffering unto death was not counted as his defeat, but rather, was the fulfillment of faithfulness and thereby victory over death. It is to understand that God's way of putting the world to rights involves not simply a reconfiguration of who should be in power, but the putting to end of the very dynamic that subjects some people to the rule of others (cf. Gal 3.28ff). But most importantly, it is to understand that God's invading presence in the world is deeply contested due to the presence of anti-God powers that refuse to give up their dominion.²⁷

Paul understands his apostolic mission as caught up in this cosmic battle that wages on between the malignant powers of Sin and death, which Jesus defeated on the cross, with the newly inaugurated powers of Christ's Spirit. The community that Paul expends himself on is for him nothing less than God's new humanity liberated from those powers of evil.

We're beginning to see that Paul's worldview extended beyond just what the human eye can see. He knew that the world was captive to powers that are not just the product of human creation. These are forces that act *on* and *in* human affairs having as their goal the alienation of creation from its creator. In fact, there is no part of the human and nonhuman creation that is not subject to these principalities and powers – including those parts of

²⁷ Horsley does regard Paul as standing with the tradition of apocalyptic Judaism, except that he regards such imagery as a kind of coded language for earthly powers. I.e., he does not accept the view that in talking about principalities and powers Paul was actually identifying cosmic and demonic powers that were in conflict with the power of the Spirit. He intends rather to focus on political worldly realities, Horsley, "New Testament Studies," 1158.

creation that were intended for good, such as the Jewish Law (cf. Rom 3.9-20, 7.7ff). Thus, for Paul, Jesus did not come to be just another ‘teacher of righteousness’ while leaving the world in tact – rather, Jesus came to redeem the creation from its enslavement to these powers and so once again be in loving communion with God. This reality is for him nothing short of ‘a new creation.’

This new creation is inherently relational - as my wife continually tells me, “its all about relationships.” Paul believes that those who are ‘in Christ’ now share in the relationality enjoyed by the Father, Son and Spirit. These relationships are fundamentally benevolent, which is to say that they are characterised by a self-giving love that have as their goal the reconciliation of all persons. To enter into this new creation community is to be reconfigured by a divine act of conflict resolution, it is to be changed by the power of forgiveness.²⁸

This cosmic perspective helps us understand Paul’s peculiar mission. For example, when confronting church disputes or behaviour he does not simply prescribe a bunch of rules to follow, because he knows that any rule is impotent against the powers that will usurp its good intention. Instead he describes what it means to live in Christ, to be a community that understands itself in relation to the story of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and on-going fellowship with the Father and Spirit.²⁹

The chief marker that distinguishes this community from the world still captive to the power of Sin is the way of the cross. No image or metaphor is more pervasive in Paul’s ethics than the way of the cross. For it is at the cross that Jesus reveals the way that God responds to the brokenness and violence of the world. Rather than striking back at his tormentors, or praying for their demise, Jesus forswears the threat of force and forgives his enemies. This

²⁸ My appreciation to Douglas Campbell for allowing me to read over his own response to counter-imperial interpretations of Paul to be published in a forthcoming journal article.

²⁹ For an account of the “narrative substructure” to Paul’s ethics see, Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

is the way of self-sacrificial love for the sake of the other.³⁰ Discipleship is a way of life empowered by God's Spirit to love those who once were considered enemies but who have now been reconciled as friends (2 Cor 5.14-21). Thus, for Paul, non-violent enemy love is not to be understood as a rule or a law (although he does at least in one case describe it as the new law of Christ; Gal 5.14), nor is it understood as fully possible outside of the realm of God's Spirit. Rather, for those who now live in Christ, having been taken up and reconstituted by his death, there become certain ways of life that are simply incongruous with this existence. Retribution towards one's enemies being one such form of life.

Turning our focus back to the Roman empire how should we now understand Paul's silence about this imperial power? First, we need to recognise that Paul does name the idolatrous way of life that once enslaved the believing community (1 Thess 1.9; Gal 4.8; 1 Cor 12.2). He does mention the 'so-called God in heaven and on earth' (1 Cor 8.4-5). He does name the 'rulers of this age' as having crucified the 'Lord of glory' (1 Cor 2.6, 8). The boast of 'peace and security' that sounds like the *Pax Romana* is attributed to those who 'belong to the night and darkness' (1 Thess 5.1-5). He does also speak frequently about power, authorities and rulers (Rom 8.35-39; 1 Cor 2.6-8; 15.24-28; Rom 13.1-7; Col 1.15-20, 2.14-15).

But as I mentioned before these ascriptions are never constricted to their earthly manifestation of the Roman empire. The reason being that the Roman empire is

not itself one of these powers, because they operate across all levels simultaneously – individual, social, political, and cosmic; like any empire, it may be co-opted, in whole or in part, into the ranks of 'the sons of darkness', but only within an undifferentiated mass whose identity is determined not by its

³⁰ See Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

current political configuration but by its alignment with power of far greater influence.³¹

In essence, Paul considered the Roman empire to be largely theologically insignificant in the story of the world. It is no more than a derivative and dependent entity animated by potentially more insidious powers that govern all social life, whether that be ancient, modern, or contemporary. Roman imperial ideology is not the main player on the world stage that both Caesar and his detractors believed it to be. The real threat lies in those powers that can turn governments into machines of war, but which can also turn neighbours against each other, or a father against his children. The real danger is that ruler of the air that can make greed rule in the heart of a person when fellow community members are struggling to survive.

Paul does not inflate the importance of Rome, because he has learnt to see Rome as governed by the same powers that animated the empires of Assyria, Babylon, the Greeks, as well as the life of Israel, and even his own life. He points to those comprehensive realities that govern even our own hearts and actions, which is not to say that he is simply concerned with individual morality, for these are powers that also shape history, governments, families, and ideologies. These are powers that can only be overcome by the freedom offered by Christ. This is why Paul is more concerned with the establishment of the new creation community than he is with the false freedom offered by Rome.

Paul's statements in Rom 13.1-7 do not thereby stand in tension or conflict with his theology. The authority of the Roman empire is by no means absolute, but inasmuch as its "authority was subservient to God's and it was capable of preserving and rewarding 'the good', it could be recognised and honoured accordingly...it expresses Paul's judgment that political authorities can be subsumed under divine power." Yet it is also true that inasmuch as the Roman empire "operated by the power and wisdom of 'this world', opposed Christ

³¹ Barclay, *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews*, 383.

and his people, or arrogated to itself false pretensions of significance, it was a manifestation of ‘the present evil age’ doomed to destruction.” It too can be subsumed under the power of Sin.³²

It makes no sense to treat Rom 13.1-7 as Paul’s political theology, as if it is a treatise for the divine right of government. Such a view fails to appreciate that government in its entirety and in its individual members are culpable of falling into the destructive power of Sin. But to believe that the Christian community must be in direct opposition to government out of principle is also ill-conceived; as the power of God’s Spirit manifest in the loving bond of community can also penetrate the different levels of government.

As an aside, I believe that this perspective on power represents a deep challenge to the modern secular State. For the democratic State is not immune to these anti-God powers just because it represents ‘the people,’ because ‘the people’ are not the criteria by which the State is protected from captivity to Sin. Remember that ‘the people’ crucified Jesus; the masses are often no less brutal than a dictator.³³ Nor does being ‘secular’ protect the State from becoming demonic and requiring the worship of its citizens, because such worship has as its goal the rejection of the presence of God. An atheistic State is no less idolatrous or religious by denying God. This perspective on power also helps us appreciate and name the political forces that transcend the boundaries of the modern State.

What we have said about the State is also no less true for the church. This community is meant to be the first fruits of God’s new creation, a contrast society where the old divisions based on religious, ethnic, gender, or class lines have finally been overcome (Gal 3.28), yet this new social reality is by no means uncontested. Instead of being a community empowered by the Spirit to enjoy Jesus’ kingdom presence the church is often led by the very powers that Jesus defeated on the cross. This is manifest in what Paul describes as

³² Barclay, *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews*, 385.

³³ See, Stanley Hauerwas, “The Church and Liberal Democracy,” in *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 84,

‘works of the Flesh’ which includes – idolatry, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, and things like these (vv 5.19-21) – which are sometimes sadly often more descriptive of the church than the fruit of the Spirit – ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control’ (5.22-23).

Paul thus tirelessly works to re-orientate the church’s vision to live its life from the perspective of the cross. Paul considers his own life from such a standpoint; ‘where the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world’ (6.14). ‘The world’ is the realm of the powers that continue to divide and destroy, the realm that rejects the grace of God, and so believes in its own sufficiency and security. It is the world that continues to believe in the necessity of violence, rather than trusting that a new creation has arrived (6.15-16). A totally new form of politics has entered the landscape, a politics that doesn't just masquerade as peace while delivering death, but a politics of peace that flow from the very relationships of the triune God. This, I believe, represents Paul’s deepest challenge to any and all politics that vie for our loyalty.

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