

Submit or ... what else.

Bible Study on Romans 13 1-7

Anglican Pacifist Fellowship Retreat Weekend, Whakatane, 10 April 2010

Recently a friend in our Bible Study Group expressed concern over the verdict of the Waihopai Trio Trial, citing Romans 13 as the basis of his concern. Scheduled to lead a Bible study at the April retreat this incident gave me my subject. The passage continues to be topical in many walks of life, though I rarely hear the passage quoted, let alone preached about.

Paul's letter to the Churches in Rome was written about 55 A.D. This was a time of rapid change in the churches as well as in Rome itself. The Emperor Claudius had died in 54 and Nero had succeeded him. Claudius had expelled all Jews from Rome in the 40's as they had been rioting, possibly because of Jewish Christians preaching in their midst. Nero had allowed the Jews to return. 'Gentile' churches were experiencing an influx of 'Jewish' Christians. There must also have been tensions amongst all Jews of the time as revolt was again being considered in Palestine. Masada A.D. 70 was not far away and many Jews believed that God would give them certain victory. Although Christians had been warned not to take part in such uprisings, family links must have brought controversy, divided loyalties, and accusations of ethnic betrayal.

Paul had not visited Rome but he hoped to visit on his way to Spain. 15.24. However he would have known some of the expelled Jews who were now returning to the capital. He recognized the very different cultural traditions that would now be living together in the same Christian family. A few scholars have considered Chapter 13 so out of place in the letter that they have suggested it to be a later addition, however when viewed against the historical background the chapter fits logically into the life of the Roman churches of the time.

The original letter did not have chapter and verse so 13.1-7 needs to be seen in a wider continuous context so I shall start at 12.14 which considers the Church facing the outside world. The earlier part of chapter 12 considers living together and unity within the church as Jew and Gentile adjust to each other.

12.14. Paul moves from relationships within the church to relationships with those outside. There is no evidence of persecution at the time but Paul assumes that it will come. Jesus, Paul and the early church are unique in blessing rather than cursing their

persecutors. Matt 5.38-48. Luke 6. 27-35. Luke 23.34. Acts 7.60. I Cor 4.12 I Peter 2 20-23. The norm was to curse.

12. 15,16. Christians must not have a ghetto mentality and be exclusive. No snobbishness, mix with your neighbours.' Make friends with nobodies, don't be the great somebody' The Message.

12.17.18 Repeats the basic command of the section, do not repay evil with evil. Take part in society as much as possible but there will be times when Christian standards differ from 'The ways of the world' Eph 5.11-17.

12 19. Paul is not forbidding justice but he is forbidding individuals to take the law into their own hands and taking personal revenge, vengeance. In the light of 13.4. „don't be a loose cannon but allow God to provide justice which may well be through the law enforcement agencies. I will avenge Deut 32.35-36. 'I'll do the judging says God, I'll take care of it' The Message.

12.20 Instead of private vengeance Paul recommends a very positive and shocking course of action. Do good to your enemy. Proverbs 25.21-22 2 Kings 6 20-23

12.21 Reflects the Sermon on the Mount and the theology of the Cross. Revenge keeps evil in circulation, sacrificial love absorbs the evil and replaces it with goodness,. Do not use evil means to overcome evil (or good !) Mt 5.39 'don't use violence to resist evil.' N.T. Wright trans.

13.1-7 Overall this is a statement about the need for ruling authorities. Arising out of 12.14 onwards ,with its call for unity amongst diverse people.12.19 is particularly relevant where it forbids individuals taking the law into their own hands. God wants an orderly society (Anglicans would add decently) Anarchy is against God's plan because where law breaks down the bullies and looters have it all their own way. Nor should there be anarchy in the economic sphere where unrestrained individualism makes a minority very rich, powerful and often arrogant. Of course authorities can be corrupt but Paul states that they too are under authority, whether they know it or not. Three times in ,v.4 and 6 Paul calls them God's servants/ stewards. Acts 23 1-5. Jesus before Pilate .John 19.11. Authorities are not divine as the Caesars thought themselves to be. All people will eventually face God's judgement. One task for the Church is to remind authorities of their servanthood and their responsibility to rule justly . God worked through Cyrus Isaiah 45.

In these verses Paul does not specifically mention relations between communities or nations nor does he legitimise violence or using evil means to promote good. Hence a 'just war' theory had to be invented to regulate and legitimise the use of power and competition between nations. Despite being used to legitimise compliance with war these verses are silent on the matter.

13.1. Every person, no exceptions, including the many people involved in the authority.

Translations give 'submit', 'be subject to', 'obey', the latter in the Jerusalem Bible and The Good News Bible. To submit does not mean total obedience although it often leads to obedience. The authorities do have a rightful claim upon us. However only Jesus has a total claim upon our lives Acts 4.18-20. 5.29. Phil 2 10-11. Some have suggested that 'authorities' also includes principalities and powers but I think v 4, sword symbol of earthly rulers and v.6. the IRD, anchor the authorities to earthly government.

Authorities that exist are established by God, is a general statement. Paul is neither providing a detailed statement of Church and State relationships, nor is he saying who should be the ruling authority nor what system of order is used. However the system should be compatible with the preceding verses and verses 2-4. Paul would know, as we know, that ruling authorities can be far from ideal and may well reverse the sentiments of verses 2 and 3. Was he only thinking of the Roman Empire at that time? 30 years later we have Revelation 13.

13.2. He who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God. Anarchists and anarchy are not what God wants for the running of society. But this verse does not say that the individual must obey specific laws or orders from an authority. It is just saying there must be an authority, God does not desire a free-for-all. There is, of course, a tension between obedience and dissent, order and anarchy. In the former the person disobeys but is prepared to suffer the consequences of dissent meted out by the authority, eg. The Waihopai Trio, with the latter there is neither acceptance of the authority nor its punishments.

13. 2-4. An ideal situation where the authorities realize themselves to be true servants of God. Paul and the Church have benefitted from the Pax Romana but they would be aware of the ethics of the system and its brutal use of force, not least its crucifixions. The sword here is the symbol of civil authority. This cannot be a mandate for capital punishment or war otherwise 12. 20-21 become a nonsense. Christians did not join the armed forces. They left if converted because they refused to kill people. (also no abortion, infanticide, murder, capital punishment or now, euthanasia.)Maintaining order through a 'police force' was acceptable 1.Peter 2.14.

13.5. People submit not only out of fear but significantly, through conscience. Conscience can work both ways so when the authority or law is evil, then our submission is to the ideal v.2-4. 'God's agents for your good', v.4 RNEB., not the actual reality of an authority which more than likely thinks itself 'God' If fear and conscience are in conflict, as they must often be in some countries, then one hopes conscience will win. But 12.14-18. Do not withdraw from society, encourage what is good (something must be), and don't seek unnecessary martyrdom.

13.6-7. Paying taxes and debts is part of social responsibility. Rome had two taxes, direct and indirect, the latter was unpopular and had led to riots. Taxes supported Caesar, the armed forces and maintenance of Empire. We are fortunate in that some of our tax goes to Health etc. Proper use of taxes promotes social justice. 'Respect those to whom honour is due.' In the context of order rather than anarchy this includes respect for office even though respect for its holder is well nigh impossible.

13. 8-10 reflects Jesus. Mat 22.37-39. And is about love fulfilling the law quoting four of the last five of the ten commandments.

13. 11-14. The world's new day dawned with Jesus and our world is now two overlapping worlds. Dawn is either or neither night nor day. In nature what is the moment when one becomes the other.? But the Resurrection of Jesus gives us the moment in history. At dawn do we look back to the night or forward to the day? We are to be living the day so we are to be up and dressed, not found in our pyjamas.

13.14. Clothed in Christ. This is the famous verse that led to the conversion of St. Augustine when he opened the New Testament at random in a Milanese garden.

References: The Daily Study Bible. Romans W. Barclay. A New Commentary on Holy Scripture C.Gore, H.L.Leighton, A. Guillaume. The New Testament Basis of Pacifism G.H.C. Macgregor. The Message of Romans. J.R.W.Stott. The New Interpreters Bible. Romans. N.T.Wright. Paul for everyone. Romans N.T.Wright. The epistle to the Romans Vincent Taylor.

V.J.Hartfield, May 2010.