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Bridge Street United Church
June 30, 2024
Readings: Romans 13:1-7; Psalm 99; Matthew 22:15-22

On Being Subject to the Governing Authorities

How ought Christians relate to the state? Since virtually the beginning of the Christian Church, that question has provoked much discussion. The conclusions arrived at have varied down through the years. I want to look at that question for several reasons. One reason is the varied reactions to the question in general and to Romans 13:1-7 in particular. A second reason is that many of us, hearing those seven verses, may feel quite conflicted. In the United Church we see Scripture as our primary authority in thinking through theological and ethical questions. Primary does not mean only, of course; there are other things—history, our experience, what we understand the Holy Spirit to be saying to us—that also guide our thinking. But as a denomination we have always placed, and we continue to place, great weight on Scripture.

Yet, when we hear this passage about being subject to the governing authorities, that there is no authority except from God and that the authorities that exist have been instituted by God and ought not be resisted—when we hear these words and the rest of that passage Vicki read, many of us find ourselves troubled. Who among us, for example, would argue that Adolf Hitler was someone to whom citizens should have been subject? Who among us would make that statement for someone like Idi Amin, whose time as President of Uganda from 1971-1979 was marked by exceptional brutality. Thinking of these, and other examples of which any one of us could think, some of us may want to take a pair of imaginary scissors and cut out that seven verse section. We may want to consign it to some first century past where it might have had

relevance but see it as having none now. And yet, if we were to do that, many of us would be left with a sense that we are somehow undercutting that principle about the important place our denomination accords Scripture for thinking about what we believe and how we, as Christians, ought to act.

So, I want to acknowledge that this text is highly problematic, at least on an initial reading. At the same time, I want to assert both that it is a text we need to take seriously and that when we probe it we shall find it has value for us, as individuals, in the early twenty-first century. In what I am going to say about Romans 13:1-7, I have borrowed very significantly from the writings of Victor Paul Furnish, a New Testament scholar who did much work from the 1970s through the first decade of this century on theology and ethics in Paul's letters and their relevance for contemporary Christians.

Unquestionably, Romans 13:1-7 is a passage with an unhappy history. These verses seem to imply that a Christian is required to support even the most tyrannical and repressive of governments (think here of someone like Idi Amin, whom I mentioned earlier) and accept even the most unjust of policies. After all, if all governing authorities have been instituted by God, how can one justify any action against such an authority? Indeed, it was to Romans 13:1-7 that many German Christians appealed as their justification for giving obedience to the Nazi regime. Every repressive government of any nation with a significant percentage of Christians among its population has cited this very passage both as an indication it is God's will that the people support the government, and as an indication that any government measure against its critics is justified.

Many of us are uncomfortable with such arguments. But can our sense that such claims by totalitarian regimes are wrong be squared with Paul's words here? What should we make of Paul's comments?

I think we need first to set these comments in both their historical and their theological context. Paul lived in a period when the Roman government was still, on the whole, viewed as a positive presence in the Mediterranean world. Granted, many Jews, especially in Judea, had great difficulty with that government. Within Judea, there was much resentment of Roman rule and a longing for a Jewish nation ruled by a great leader, such as David had been. Elsewhere in the Mediterranean world, there existed a greater acceptance of the Roman Empire. Further, among much of that population, including those Jews who lived in Egypt and other areas around the Mediterranean, there was an appreciation for the order and stability the Roman imperial government brought. Paul likely shared that view of Jews outside Judea, given that Rome's military dominance of that world meant he could travel by sea with little fear of pirates and on land with little risk of being accosted by robbers. The order and stability of the Roman Empire made it easier for Paul to spread his message. Further, the first persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire, that of Nero in 64 CE, still lay in the future.

Two points need to be made about the theological context of Romans 13:1-7. First, Paul believed that the end of the world would soon come, perhaps even before his own death. That understanding did not mean that Christians ceased to have any responsibility to the age and world in which they lived. However, that understanding that the end of world would soon come certainly influenced the degree to which Paul, and other Christians of his day, would have judged it important to try to make major alterations in their society, alterations that would have required much time to implement.

Second, the guiding principle for the relationship Christians were to have to the world, and the immediate context of verses 1-7, is the law of love. In what immediately follows Romans 13:1-7, namely verses 8-10, Paul asserts that the only debt one should owe another person was to love that person. He stated that the person who loved the neighbour had fulfilled the law. He went on to point out that many of the Ten Commandments, at least those that dealt with our responsibilities to other persons, could be summed up in the command, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” “Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” [Romans 13:10].

It is against this background—the placing of a high value on stability and security and the operation of the law of love—that we should read Paul’s comments on the appropriate Christian relationship to the governing authorities, and it is out of that background that we should shape our understanding of what these verses say to us, in our time.

The first thing to note is the wording Paul uses. He tells the Roman Christians, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.” Later in this passage he repeats that advice. But nowhere in this passage, or elsewhere in Paul’s writings, does he speak about obeying the governing authorities. That distinction I am drawing may seem to be splitting hairs, but I think the distinction is significant, more significant than we initially realize. On this point, let me quote Victor Furnish, to whom I referred earlier. Paul

speaks of being subject to them, the opposite of which is resisting them. . . . The opposite of “subjection” is not so much “disobedience” as “disruption.” To “be subject” means to acknowledge the reality of the political structure under which one stands, and to respect it. One might, for example, “disobey” a law of the state and still ‘be subject’ to the political structure, namely to the due processes and penalties administered in cases of disobedience [Furnish, p. 127].

To push this point still further, one can be subject to the authorities without having to obey them in all things. One example that immediately comes to my mind of this point about the difference between being “subject to” and “obeying” would be the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. Key leaders and supporters of that movement found themselves in jail from time to time. They were certainly subject to the authorities, but they were not obedient to them.

A second significant point about this passage—when Paul notes in the first verse that “there is no authority except from God,” he is saying that authority is not the personal property of those who exercise it. The authority of a governing power is something with which it has been entrusted. No governing authority generates its own authority from within itself. In other words, for Paul, no governing authority is self validating.

Paul’s conviction that every governing authority is accountable to God follows this point. Indeed, Paul describes the governing authorities as “God’s servants.” If the authority they exercise has its basis in this relationship, it follows that when they no longer exercise their authority in God’s service, “it is no longer the authority of God” [Furnish, p, 136].

What conclusions can we draw from these observations? Paul certainly sees government as a useful thing. Indeed, one of his points is that the governing authorities exist to serve the good of those who are governed. I think we would agree. Stability and order can only be achieved if some form of government exists. Certainly limits are necessary on our individual freedom for the good of others. That is why, for example, we have laws specifying how fast we can drive, indicating the side of the road upon which we should drive, prohibiting drinking and driving, and so on. But Paul does not equate any governing authority or any form of government with the kingdom of God. Paul sees governing authorities as neutral entities; they are there to

support the good. We as Christians ought to help to maintain such authorities, including, as he stresses in verses six and seven, paying our taxes.

What Paul also makes clear, both in these verses, and in the verses that precede and that follow Romans 13:1-7, is that our being subject to the governing authorities is always secondary to the allegiance we owe God. In the previous chapter, he tells the Roman Christians that they are not to be conformed to the world. Rather, they are to be transformed persons who seek God's will and who try to act in accordance with that will. In Romans 13:8-10, the verses that immediately follow today's reading, Paul reminds the Roman Christians that they stand finally under the love. Their God is Jesus Christ, not Caesar.

The importance of this last point cannot be underestimated. I think it is a fair understanding of the intent of this passage to say that we ought to respect, honour, and support to the governing authorities. That our subjection to such authorities is second to our subjection to God does not mean that we should refuse to give these governing authorities respect, honour, and support. It is in bringing about and maintaining orderly and stable conditions that such governments play a role by creating the conditions in which the kingdom of God can more easily advance. But when subjection to the governing authorities becomes blind obedience, we cross the threshold into idolatry.

I also believe that Paul's point about the one to whom our ultimate allegiance is owed can lead us to say, in particular circumstances, that governments ought to be resisted. Such occasions are very few and far between. But there were Christians in Nazi Germany, especially in the late 1930s and into the early and mid 1940s, who came to believe, on the grounds of their Christian convictions, that Adolf Hitler's government needed to be resisted. Among those reaching that conclusion was the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As a result, Bonhoeffer participated

in a plot to assassinate Hitler. The resulting attempt was unsuccessful, and Bonhoeffer was executed for his role in the plot.

As I noted, I think that the occasions when governments ought to be resisted are very few and far between. On the occasion when some thoughts arise and when we think such a step may be necessary, we need to be very sure that we trying to serve should be the interests of the neighbour, not some hope for personal gain for ourselves. At the same time, it is certainly possible to imagine circumstances in which the governing authorities no longer serve good but, indeed, serve evil. Likewise, it is possible to imagine circumstances in which the governing authorities seek for themselves the ultimate allegiance that ought to be given to God alone. How would we determine when such a situation has arisen? I suggest that the best place to start it with an application of the law of love, that very law to which Paul refers in the three verses that follow upon today's reading. That law, summed up in the commands to love our neighbour and to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, must be our guide.

And to that God to whom we owe our allegiance, to the one in whom we have seen that God most fully revealed, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that God with us now and with us always, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

Resource:

Furnish, Victor Paul. *The Moral Teaching of Paul*. 2nd Edition, revised. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985.