

A Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans [13]

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Chapter 13:1-14: Practical Wisdom

Verses 1-7: Civil Authority and Christian Response: Paul says that all authority is from God. He addresses Christians in Rome in their particular political situation of tension. Paul is familiar with Jewish opposition to Roman occupation of Palestine and resistance to pay taxes. How do Christians in Rome react to Emperor Nero's taxations? Paul's teaching on civil authority here has its Jewish background of respecting authority in Jeremiah 29:7: 'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf'. Paul has in mind the welfare of the young minority Christian community in Rome. They need to be prudent in their interaction with political powers. Violent rebellion against Rome will not serve Christian mission and it is not the example of Christ. The Jewish militant group Zealots were organizing at this time to overthrow Roman rule in Palestine. Christians in Rome, being a minority, if refuse to pay taxes, would attract unwanted scrutiny by authorities. Living a non-confrontational life and paying taxes do not mean Christians conform to the corrupting ways of civil authorities.

Christian response to civil authority is as law abiding citizens and transforming society by life witness. Though all authority is from God and earthly rulers share in God's authority, rulers don't often act accordingly. Wisdom 6:3 warns the rulers: 'For your dominion was given you from the Lord and your sovereignty from the Most High, who will search out your works and inquire into your plans'. Authority is not authoritarianism obsessed with power. Romans 13:1, 'be subject to the governing authority' was used by many authoritarian governments to justify their right to do what they want! Authority, if not for serving the people is not of God! Paul here does not analyze the conduct of civil rulers but implied that their conduct is good and a just ruler is a deterrent to evil doers. Christians see the world as a passing reality and experience a spiritual freedom in Christ, therefore they seek harmony in everything and do not entertain hostility toward anyone; overcome evil with good!

Verses 8-14: Life here and beyond: From previous analyses of Mosaic law, Paul again reminds Christians that love fulfills all requirements of law. Law can only be imperfectly obeyed but love encompasses wholeness of life! Love is the natural conduct of Christians because they belong to Christ. Love removes legalism in Christian conduct. Love is not an obligation but an outward expression of Christian existence. Love enables to live a transparent life, to be faithful to commitment to God and others. Laws, in effect, are tools to live love; law becomes alien to Christians, if it opposes demands of love! Christian action motivated by love enlightens all minds.

Christians are in a 'new age', age of salvation and living in the universal presence of the Risen Christ. In Christ, the age of darkness and death are gone! The new age is 'Christ Realm' and Christians do not cling to 'works of darkness'. Christians encounter a new dawn that of the Easter morning; they live the Easter faith and that makes them belong to the light. To remain in the light Christians put on the 'armor' of faith, hope and love [1 Thessalonians 5:8]. Being in light, Christians do not engage in sexual excesses, drunken orgies, destructive quarrels or

jealousy. These are called 'desires of the flesh' [Galatians 5:13] that plunge Christians back into darkness. Love for Paul is to 'put on Christ' and the reality of being in Christ must inspire Christian conduct.

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