

1.19

Church and State: The Ethic of Subordination

Biblical studies on “how the New Testament perceives church-state relationships” identify three distinct stances that are commended in different New Testament writings:

1. the ethic of subordination (found in the letters of Paul and in 1 Peter)
2. the ethic of resistance (found in Johannine writings and, especially, Revelation)
3. the ethic of critical distancing (found in the Synoptic Gospels)

Here we look at the ethic of subordination. For the other two views, see 1.18 and 1.20.

Summary Description of the Ethic of Subordination

The government is understood to be a gift of God, divinely established for the common good. Its God-given purpose is to encourage and maintain what is beneficial for our life together and to discourage what is harmful and disruptive. Or, put another way, the state is God’s instrument in the human community to preserve law and order and to promote justice and peace. Its power consists in its responsibility to exercise its authority toward these beneficial ends. Christians, in turn, owe to the government their loyalty and respect. Because government is a divine gift they support its preservation of the good and opposition to evil,

pray for those in authority, pay taxes, and try to live as model citizens of human communities. In so doing they act in accordance with God's intent. Conversely, to resist the state is to risk both punishment and divine disapproval.¹

Key Texts Expressive of the Ethic of Subordination

Sirach 10:4 (second-century-BCE deuterocanonical/apocryphal writing):

The government of the earth is in the hand of the Lord, and over it he will raise up the right leader for the time.

Romans 13:1–6:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore, one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

Titus 3:1–2:

Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone.

1 Peter 2:13–17:

For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

Some Common Observations regarding the Ethic of Subordination

- According to Walter Pilgrim, this position has been the dominant one for Christian history.
- The position may derive in some sense from the fourth (Calvinist fifth) commandment. Note, for example, Martin Luther's explanation of that commandment in his *Small Catechism*:

Honor your father and mother.

Question: What does this mean?

Answer: We are to fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents *and others in authority*, but respect, obey, love, and esteem them.

- When Paul wrote Romans 13:1–7, he probably thought that the end of the world was near. Would it affect his position if he knew otherwise? Consider:
 1. Titus and 1 Peter are less informed by such eschatological urgency.
 2. Holders of other views also thought the end of the world was near.
 3. Should eschatological urgency be regarded as a first-century mistake or as a characteristic intrinsic to Christian theology?
- The Romans text was probably written around 55 CE, during the reign of Nero (54–68), who would later persecute Christians horribly and have Paul put to death by the sword. However, during the early years of Nero’s rule, conditions in Rome were favorable for Christians.
- The word translated “be subject to” in Romans 13:1 (*hypotassein*) implies some degree of mutuality or reciprocal obligation. It is elsewhere used of wives to husbands. Some have suggested “be subordinate to” as a better translation, the key point being to recognize one’s proper position or role within the social structure.

- It is interesting that the Romans text does not use the word “obey” (*peitharchein*) with regard to governing authorities. That word is used in Titus 3:5 but not with the authorities as its obvious object. The only New Testament text using the word “obey” with explicit reference to governing authorities is Acts 5:29: “Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than any human authority.’”
- Is Paul’s counsel in Romans specific to some particular situation? Some have suggested that he wanted to discourage Roman Christians from taking part in the sort of revolt against the empire undertaken by Jewish nationalists in the late 60s.
- The claim that God instituted all governing authorities appears to be in tension with views expressed elsewhere in the New Testament. For example, in Luke 4:6 the devil says to Jesus that authority over all the kingdoms of the world “has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please.”
- This counsel regarding submission to governing authorities seems to be based entirely on an assumption of good and just government, which wields the power of the sword to reward good and punish wrong. Does Paul mean to indicate that this is always the case (evident or not) or does he mean to offer counsel that would be appropriate only when that is in fact the case?

1. Walter Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors: Church and State in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 7.