REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, CHARLOTTE

DUELING LOYALTIES? PAUL, CHRISTIANS, AND (BAD) GOVERNMENT

SUBMITTED TO ROBERT J. CARA

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

NT3100 PAULINE EPISTLES

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APRIL 29, 2025

As a correspondent, Paul was certainly prolific. His thirteen extant letters detail a broad range of theological and practical topics for the burgeoning first century church. Despite this, his explicit discussions concerning government are actually quite limited. Three texts mention the magistrates and Christians' duties towards them. Romans 13:1-7 is the largest pericope on the topic, outlining in fairly explicit terms a set of principles regarding this issue; 1 Timothy 2:1-3 details another duty, unmentioned in Romans: the duty of Christian prayer for all people, including rulers; Titus 3:1 enjoins a congregational deference to governing authorities. Taken alone, each of these texts seems to stress a high degree of deference to civil authorities. The wars of the last century along with a variety of anti-authoritarian ideologies common in academia and the broader culture have combined to make this surface level interaction with the text seem either immoral or untenable. Scholars and theologians have responded in a variety of manners, some like N.T. Wright by stressing Paul's anti-imperial rhetoric and others, like Jewett, express clear concern at Paul's meaning.[1] Evangelical scholars have generally reacted differently, by relying on the entire Pauline corpus to determine principles for interpreting and applying these texts effectively. By taking a more balanced approach using texts like Philippians 3:20, which states that the Christian's citizenship is in heaven, it is readily apparent that Paul's doctrine is neither rooted in anti-imperial activism nor in cowardly obeisance to an evil empire, but is instead rooted in his theology of submission to Christ. Paul's theology of the relationship between the Christian and the government is one of dual submission: submission to government as empowered by and itself subject to God, and submission to Christ and his kingdom. The two overlap, but consistent with Paul's 'already and not yet' eschatology, the former submission is itself only to be rendered in a manner subservient to the believer's service to God. To demonstrate this, the following

[1] N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 59-79. Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 803

paper will primarily consider the four texts already mentioned—Romans 13:1-7, 1 Timothy 2:1-3, Titus 3:1, and Philippians 3:20—before presenting a broader consideration of Pauline theology concerning the topic. Following this, the paper will conclude with a broad summary of Paul's arguments and a brief consideration of its ramifications for contemporary church life.

Authority from God: Romans 13:1-7

The first text to consider is that of Romans 13:1-7. Following a series of appeals to Christian love and charity in chapter 12, Paul abruptly pivots to a consideration of Christians and their actions in the broader context of the governed world.[2] While this shift from private to public action is swift and somewhat stylistically harsh, this does not mean to imply that the passage is not relevant to what precedes it. Already in 12:18, Paul has instructed his audience to "live peaceably with all,"[3] such that they are not to live in conflict with those around them if and when at all possible. In fact, they are to leave revenge and retribution to the "wrath of God" (12:19). This line of thinking, derived from Deut 32:35, is a sharp reminder that the believer's life is to be one of grace and faith in God who is just. This principle possesses parallels with Paul's line of thinking in 13:1-7, and in particular with the thoughts of verses 4 and 5. Thus, Paul's pattern of thought is not slapdash or disunited.

Verse 1 expresses the theological rationale for obedience to governing authorities. When Paul says that "there is no authority except from God," he is referring, despite the widely derided

[2] This passage is in fact so abrupt (there is no conjunction linking it to the prior passage in Greek) that a number of scholars have wondered whether or not it could be an interpolation. While this hypothesis had its day, most scholars reject this view for the simple reason that all of the relevant manuscript evidence which remains extant points to its inclusion. For more, see James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 38B (Dallas, Tex: Zondervan Academic, 1988), 758; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans,* Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2018), 677-678.

[3] Note that all translations, unless otherwise noted, are ESV.

minority opinion of Cullmann, to human authorities;[4] while ἐξουσία often does refer to angelic authorities, because of the references to taxes found later in the passage it is quite clear that only human figures are intended. These figures are "instituted by God"; in keeping with the primary meaning of the verb, τάσσω, they are "assign[ed]… to a particular task."[5] Note again that this task is assigned "by God." The role of the ruler is relative to the role of God himself, at once legitimizing earthly authorities and relativizing the scope of their power. This first verse is paradigmatic for the remainder of the passage. Porter, in his novel interpretation, would have it further relativized under the guise of an "empire-critical" hermeneutic, in which the very introduction of the entire letter in 1:1-2 establishes Paul's identity as a critic of the Roman Empire.[6] While this theory is not completely unmerited, it is frankly unnecessary, given that these powers are explicitly subordinated to God.[7] It is because of this divine origin of government that human beings are called to avoid resistance when possible.[8] This idea echoes the exilic literature of Israel,[9] and it mirrors Paul's prior admonitions against revenge in 12:19. It

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[4] Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Chicago: Eerdmans, 1997), 320.

[5] Swanson, *DBL* 5435

[6] See Stanley E. Porter, "Paul Confronts Caesar with the Good News," Stanley E. Porter, ed., *Empire in the New Testament* (Eugene, Or: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 171-193. While much of the historical data presented by Porter is fascinating and ought not to be merely hand waved away, it makes Paul's point in Romans, and especially in Romans 13, too subtle for his audience to likely have understood properly. It also probably overestimates Paul's fear of censorship— as if to say that the man who was able to make bold proclamations throughout his ministry was too scared to mention the evils of his own day. It seems far more likely that Paul was not concerned with world-transformation. Indeed, as Wall states it well, "Paul is not a shy guy!" Robert W Wall, "Empire, Church, and Missio Dei: On Praying for Our Kings (1 Timothy 2:1-2)," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 47, no. 1 (December 31, 2012): 7–24, 9.

[7] Frank S. Thielman, *Romans*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 608.

[8] It should be noted that this portion of Paul's teaching is not necessarily to be considered exclusively Christian. Historically, any number of faiths and philosophies, ranging from Judaism to Stoicism, would take similar theoretical tacts to the issue. Cf. Dunn, *Romans* WBC vol 38B. 771.

[9] See, for example, the divine command to the Israelites to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile" in Jer 29:7.

is certainly not a call to obey any particular government in all of their actions—Paul would certainly agree with the other apostles that "We must obey God rather than man," (Acts 5:29). Rather, it is a reminder that the legitimate governments stand over and against chaos, in order to restrain evil and conduct limited human judgement which looks forward to God's ultimate judgement in the end. This idea is in view in verses 3 and 4—government is a διάκονός, a servant of God. While this idea can and has been overinterpreted quite badly in church history, at its heart is the idea that government instills order within creation in accordance with the first use of the law.[10] It restrains evil by punishing it, but its judgements are not necessarily final or ultimate; at its best, it encourages good citizens to continue doing so.[11] Cranfield, following Calvin, suggests that the "good" towards which government is established is in fact the "good" of Romans 8:28: the believer's salvation.[12] This is true regardless of whether the ruler is just or

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[10] The history and irony of this text's usage through church history could likely provide enough material for at least one monograph. For example, although early Lutheran commentators such as Melanchthon would generally take a very similar exegetical tact to that displayed by my own interpretation, many in recent decades have understandably come to fear the faulty application of these verses. Hence Schreiner's comment that "It was simply not [Paul's] intention to detail here the full relationship of believers to the government… The intention in Romans is to sketch the normal and isia; relationship between believers and ruling power." Schreiner *Romans,* BECNT, 688. Cf. Philip Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, (St. Louis, Mo: Concordia Pub House, 1992), 216-223. Longenecker provides a useful summary of the history of this passage's interpretation and the genuine concern which it has aroused. Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2016), 962-965. While Longenecker's summary is useful, his support for Jewett's idea that Romans 13:1-7 is no longer applicable to Christians is frankly unhelpful. Cf. Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006). Certainly, this text has been misused on many occasions, but *abusus non tollit usum*. This passage, interpreted properly as a general admonition and not an absolute standard, is actually profoundly important for Christians to recognize. While Matera and Fitzmeyer are correct to note that this passage is not about the state and church as such (it explicitly mentions neither) to deny that it presents general principles applicable to both is exegetically untenable. See Frank J. Matera, *Romans,* ed. Mikeal C. Parsons and Charles Talbert (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 303; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 662.

[11] Winter argues that the "good" in question here is actually the good of civic benefaction—an important reality in Roman civic culture which could certainly be considered as a part of the 'good' encouraged by Paul; nevertheless, it seems that Paul is speaking of moral good, as he directly contrasts it with evil (κακός). Bruce Winter, "Roman Law and Roman Society" in Peter Oakes, ed., *Rome in the Bible and the Early Church* (Carlisle, Cumbria; Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Pub Group, 2002), 81-82.

[12] C. E. B. Cranfield, *Commentary on Romans IX-XVI and Essays: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Vol. 2*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 666. This is in contrast to the idea

unjust. Because rulers are put in place by God, disobedience is seen as a matter of συνείδησις, "conscience," that is, disobedience which does not come from higher obedience to God should harm one's conscience. To Paul, this all naturally results in the idea that believers should "Pay to all what is owed to them," meaning that Christians must abide by the laws of their respective lands. Thus, Paul presents a vivid and simple picture of the Christian's relationship to the government: rooted in the fear of God, Christians must nevertheless submit to their governing authorities so long as these authorities do not try to impinge upon God's own rights.

Paul's theology of government is likely unsatisfying to many. Framing Paul as a critic of empire in response is unhelpful; as Dunn notes, the thrust of Paul's argument is actually quietist in nature. Nevertheless, this is not an amoral quietism—instead, Paul makes clear that for the Christian, to submit to the government is to submit to God. As Bird puts it, "Paul does not want Christians trying to effect a temporary revolution that effectively replaces one dictator with another one, nor believing that they transcend obligations to the state."[13] Paul would have the Roman Christians instead to be scrupulous citizens, examples of Christian love in the midst of a trying society. This service is not out of devotion to any man as a man—rather, it is to be rendered to men who are serving in divinely established roles. In other words, submission to government is a matter of submission to God.[14] This divine submission supersedes submission to mere humans. Nevertheless, Paul is a realist, arguing that Christians must continue to live in the

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presented by Fitzmeyer, that the passage is principally referring to something like the "common good." Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, AB, 668.

[13] Michael Bird, "'One who will arise to rule over the nations': Paul's letter to the Romans and the Roman Empire," in Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica, eds., *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2013), 160.

[14] Note that the term translated "submission" is itself a hotly debated one and will be mentioned briefly during discussion of Titus 3:1.

world as witnesses. This is consistent with his further, briefer statements in 1 Timothy 2:1-3 and Titus 3. Now, our attention must turn to the former.

Prayer for (Bad) Kings: 1 Timothy 2:1-3

In 1 Timothy 2:1-3, Paul instructs Timothy briefly on the subject of prayer. While he mentions several distinct types of prayer, for our purposes it is far more important to determine the people for whom Paul instructs prayer to be offered and the motivation for doing so.

First, Paul instructs that prayers are to be made "for all people" (2:1).[15] While there is nothing in the text to discourage believers from offering up prayers in private, the context suggests that these sorts of prayers were intended to be offered up within a public worship service. These prayers are to be offered up in particular for "kings and all who are in high positions" (2:2). As Mounce notes, Paul's admonition "becomes even more significant when it is remembered that Nero (A.D. 54-68) was emperor."[16] As mentioned in the discussion of Romans 13, these rulers demonstrate significant but limited authority, exercised under the watchful eye of God.[17] Exact articulations of what these prayers were to look like has varied historically.[18] Some

[15] There is significant debate between Calvinists and non-Calvinists of various stripes as to whether the term "all" here and later in verse 4 is to be taken in a general sense, meaning "all kinds of people," or in the more specific sense of "each human being." I prefer the former, as it is most consistent with Paul's reference in 2:2 to general categories of people.

[16] William D. Mounce, WBC Vol. 46*, Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc, 2000), 81.

[17] Cf. Wainwright's comment that, because prayer necessarily implies that the magistrate is under divine authority, "The civil authority is not autonomous, and its task is restricted to ensuring a civic peace in which a pious and moral life is possible." Geoffrey Wainwright, "Praying for Kings: The Place of Human Rulers in the Divine Plan of Salvation," *Ex Auditu* 2 (December 31, 1986): 117–27, 120.

[18] Jay Twomey, *The Pastoral Epistles Through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 33-35.

authors include churchly authorities to be considered under the phrase "all in high positions";[19] while Paul would certainly have no objection to praying for ecclesial leaders, there is no contextual reason for this to be more than a hendiadys along with the word βασιλεύς. Thus, Paul has in mind that believers publicly pray for those in authority over them—whether they like them or not. This is to be done so that believers "may live a peaceful and quiet life" (2:2), in other words, so that Christians can live faithfully as witnesses in the wider world.

Despite Paul's many encouragements to avoid worldly behaviors, he presents no image of a church completely withdrawn from the wider world. He also does not hint that the church is to pray in order to advance its own political agenda within this current world. Rather, Paul is concerned that the church does what "is good and pleasing in the sight of God our Savior" (3:3). Paul wants believers to "live quietly, and to mind your own affairs… so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one" (1 Thess 4:11-12). Paul's ambition for Timothy quite clearly has to do with the church's function as a witness to the work of Christ. In this capacity, he never critiques the Roman Empire, even subversively, but instead proclaims boldly that God "desires all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."[20] Paul's evident desire for Christians is that they might live simple, holy lives which are pleasing to God and cause no unnecessary offense to other people. He nowhere expresses the opinion that this

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[19] George T. Montague, *First and Second Timothy, Titus (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture)*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 133.

[20] Again, it seems best contextually to interpret this as pertaining to people of every category and not necessarily every single human being. For more on the various nature of the wills of God as they relate to this passage, see Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. William Pringle, Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. XXI, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 54-55. For more on the wills of God in the Reformed tradition, cf. Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 168-176.

might result in transformation of society within his own time. Rather, he longs for Christians to be a transformed society which strives for the good of the broader society in which it finds itself.

This idea is not merely Pauline. Many authors have noted, at least in a sweeping manner, the similarities between this passage and the allusions to the text of Jeremiah 29 (36 LXX) and the book of 1 Timothy. Both encourage a holy life among the trying presence of evil outsiders who need to know God. In Jeremiah 29:7, the exiles are told to "seek the welfare of the city… and pray to the Lord on its behalf." The reasoning provided is quite similar to that of Paul. It is not primarily that the Jewish exiles could become a political force or somehow overthrow a foreign ruler. Instead, Jeremiah says that "in its welfare you will find your welfare." Aich does well in summarizing his own findings about these allusions,

> One must invariably recall that Babylon was still Babylon and that the Roman Empire was still the Roman Empire. Ultimately, these insights from a thematic inner-biblical investigation—those detailing the "middle way" between accommodation and fervent polemics—coincide with what prominent scholars have already circulated in regard to the political setting of the PE.[21]

Major reform from Babylon would have been shocking in the exiles' day; so too would the conversion of a figure like Nero, steeped in the dueling worlds Stoic thought and maniacal rage. Both worlds required prayer. Both worlds could indeed provide a form of peace for a time. None would be the believer's final home.[22]

In Paul's day, believers had very few political options. Choosing improperly would only hamper the church and therefore the spread of the gospel. The mission of the church, then, was

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[21] Benjamin James Aich, "ALLUSIVE ECHOES BETWEEN JEREMIAH 36 LXX AND 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-2: AN INNER-BIBLICAL STUDY," *Restoration Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (December 31, 2023): 1–15, 12.

[22] While not Pauline in my estimation or that of most contemporary scholars, the thinking of the author of Hebrews on this subject is helpful and coincides quite nicely with that of Paul himself. See especially Hebrews 11:16.

not to seek to destroy or overthrow the world system, but to work within its limitations for the benefit first of the church and then of those all around, in order that the gospel could be proclaimed to all kings of men.

Teach Them to Obey: Titus 3:1

The third famous passage often treated with regard to Paul's ideas about the Christian and the civil magistrate is found in Titus 3:1. Here as in 1 Timothy, Paul is instructing a young pastor so that he can be an effective minister of the gospel to his congregation, this time on the island of Crete. Among the many direct orders given by Paul, the one from 3:1a is of concern here: "Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities." This text comes with three simple exegetical questions: what is the (perhaps implied) antecedent of "them," what does it mean to submit, and who are the rulers and authorities? The first and last questions are relatively easy to answer: Paul is telling Titus to instruct the Cretan Christian community, and there is little doubt that the terms "rulers" (ἀρχή) and "authorities" (ἐξουσία) refer to earthly rulers—the idea that Paul would encourage submission to all kinds of angels would be shocking.[23] This leaves the central question: what does it mean to submit?

Here, Paul uses the same term that is used in Romans 13:1 and 13:5, ὑποτάσσω. This term is found in a number of passages (see Eph. 5:22, 1 Cor 15:27; Eph 1:22, Phil 3:21). While it is sometimes glossed as "obey," its translation as a term is somewhat more complicated.[24] Here, the term is in the present passive infinitive. Believers are "to be submissive" as the ESV has it, or

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[23] See the previous discussion concerning this issue on page 4.

[24] *DBL Greek* 5718 defines the term as "obey, be obedient; bring under control; Cambridge provides four glosses—1) "to subjugate"; 2) "subject"; 3) "classify" and 4) "assign." Quite clearly, here, the last two are not options (unless Paul was ordering Titus to start a school of political theory). James Diggle, ed., *The Cambridge Greek Lexicon.* vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 1440. cf. *TDNT* Vol. 8, 39.

to "be subject to" rulers and authorities. Paul commands wives to have the same attitude towards their husbands in Ephesians 5:22. The term does not signify uncritical obedience; Paul nowhere says to submit in such a manner as to sin. Rather, Christians are called to be "exemplary subjects," living out godly lives while nevertheless seeking to behave in a manner first obedient to Christ and then to the government, inasmuch as the two do not conflict.[25] Thus, Titus 3:1 adds to the weight of passages like Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Timothy 2:1-3, even if it adds little of substance. All three make it markedly clear that rulers are from God, and that Christians are to be good citizens in order to be good witnesses, at least so far as those do not contradict.[26]

Citizens in Heaven: Philippians 3:20

Altogether, it would appear that Paul's theology is minimally focused on the powers that be. The three passages treated prior stress the fact that government is a good gift designed in part to stabilize society and provide a firm, predictable foundation such that good teaching and good morals can be spread. Paul also nowhere suggests that Christians should pull the levers of power themselves—this would understandably have been beyond his expectations, particularly when dealing with the practical considerations of his own day. And yet, to describe the Pauline view in full there is one more passage which is quite necessary to address. In Philippians 3:20, Paul pivots from discussing his opponents to discussing his audience in the Philippian church by stating, "But our citizenship [πολίτευμα] is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." There are several important questions regarding this text and its relationship to the

[25] Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2018), 538; cf. his comments on 1 Timothy 2:2 on page 148; see also Philip la Grange Du Toit, "Paul, Empire and Eschatology," 5.

[26] Cf. Jewett's comment on Romans 13:1-7, in which he calls this willingness to work within the system of the Roman world "an excruciating example of Paul's willingness to be in the world but not of the world, to reside between the ages." *Romans*, 803.

others presented already. First, we will consider an exegetical issue: the meaning of the term πολίτευμα itself. Following this, we will interpret the passage within its own context, before examining the relationship between the principle it establishes and other Pauline texts.

First, the question of the precise meaning of πολίτευμα in this chapter is a complicated one. The term is a *hapax legomena* in the NT, and as a result defining it precisely requires careful attention to other sources. While the overwhelming majority of modern translations take it to mean "citizenship," the gloss is a fairly simplistic one for a more complicated term. Reumann translates it "our governing civic association," suggesting that "Attractive as political aspects are and the (pretentious) glory of a (Christian) state or kingdom (in heaven), for house churches the local club or association lay much closer at hand."[27] He does so in contrast to other scholars, who read the term in light of the colonial nature of Philippi and suggest that Paul's use of the term is in fact his subversive request that they entirely forsake any earthly citizenship.[28] The *Cambridge Greek Lexicon* defines the term as referring to "a political decision or course of action" or "government."[29] *BDAG* defines it similarly[30] Hansen explains the implication of the term well: "Our governing power, our executive authority is in heaven."[31] Taken this way, the term itself refers to a believer's identity with and obligations towards Christ Himself. While Reuman is correct, then, to note that there are a number of complicating factors in regards to

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[27] John Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, United States: Yale University Press, 2008), 576.

[28] See Hawthorne 231. For other examples and criticism of this stream of interpretation, see Cohick, "Philippians and Empire" in *Jesus is Lord, Caesar is Not* 172-173. Cf. Peter Oakes, "God's Sovereignty over Roman Authorities: A Theme in Philippians," Oakes, *Rome in the Bible and the Early Church*, 138-139.

[29] Diggle, *Cambridge Greek Lexicon*, 1154

[30] *BDAG,* 844.

[31] G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2009), 269.

translating πολίτευμα, it is nevertheless apparent that translating it in this manner is clearly aligned with Paul's meaning in the text, even if it is slightly imprecise.

With this issue of Greek translation considered, two questions remain: what precisely does this passage mean on its own terms, and how does that meaning relate to Paul's thought concerning government throughout the rest of his oeuvre? First, the question of the passage's precise meaning contextually is actually quite clear. Paul is presenting a clear contrast between himself and the false teachers who were plaguing the Philippian church, encouraging his audience to imitate him in 3:17 prior to warning them of the true wickedness of his opponents in 3:18-19. In 3:19, Paul lays out the alternative allegiances which the false teachers display: "their belly" and "earthly things." Instead of devotion to a kingdom that is "not of this world" (John 18:36), the false teachers were consumed by love for the present. Paul starkly contrasts this kind of selfish ambition by demonstrating that believers are instead regulated by something far greater: God himself.[32] The passage is about obedience to Christ over and against worldly motivations. Thus, it may seem odd that the passage has so often been included in the controversies surrounding a Christian theology of government; contextually, this is actually only a secondary (or even tertiary) concern of Paul's. This itself is a good reason to suggest that reading it as primarily anti-imperial is an unnecessary overcomplication. That is to say, making any anti-imperial undertones the primary lens with which to view the text can easily cause a failure to understand its broader message. The Philippians were not overly devoted to the Empire, according to Paul's letter. They were, instead, in danger of being overly devoted to

[32] Cf. Hawthorne's comment that this passage, in summary, "is a capstone to Paul's teaching: in Christ the Christian has been brought into a new, ethically controlled relationship to God." Gerald F. Hawthorne et al., *Philippians*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David Allen Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker, WBC, vol. 43, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2015), 230.

themselves.[33] Their allegiance ought to have been to Christ in lieu of their own stomachs—or Caesar, although he is at best in the background.

Theology Undergirding Ethics

In light of passages directly concerning the issue and those with implications for it, Paul's doctrine of the Christian life and its relationship to government can be clearly seen. He stresses that a Christian's ultimate duty is to the Lord Jesus, and not to his own cravings or the whims of any despot, benevolent or otherwise. Generally, Paul is ambivalent to specific issues of politics and government. He is time and again willing to use political, legal, and military language to describe the Christian life, but, in a day obsessed with political machinations, he rarely mentions his own political context. When he does, it is generally with a simple word of encouragement to function well in civil society, to pray for those in power—that they would govern well and thereby that the truth of the gospel might spread even to them—and that Christians ought to submit as much as possible to the law. This submission reflects the fact that, to Paul, Christ has not yet returned and, therefore, Christians must still live functioning lives in the midst of an ever trying world. Nevertheless, it is not a total submission, an uncritical obedience or love for country which should make Christians a mere pawn in the political game. Instead, to Paul, the Christian's citizenship is in heaven—that is, the Christian is governed ultimately by the laws of Christ's kingdom, and not merely Caesar's. Christians owe the government because it is from God. Indeed, Paul's position "is not founded in the first instance on what is to be expected from

[33] That is not to say, of course, that dedication to Rome was not a secondary concern; merely that it contextually does not seem to have been the main issue for Paul. Cf. Francis Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, Sons: Legal Metaphors in the Epistles* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academie Books, 1984), 60-66 for more on the metaphor of citizenship in the NT.

the civil authorities, but what one owes them for God's sake."[34] Caesar's laws can be good and necessary, but when they contradict King Jesus, obedience becomes sin. While Schreiner is right to state that Paul "does not endorse a private Christianity,"[35] it is nevertheless clear that Paul's general image of a Christian's public life is a simple one of submission to government and God. While this submission is not absolute, it is clear from his emphasis upon it that Paul did not mean at all to weaken the necessity of it.

What does this idea make of so-called "anti-imperial" interpretations of Paul? Broadly speaking, these interpretations highlight real historical and archaeological data from first century Rome which are both fascinating on their own terms and useful in deepening our understanding of the NT and its world. They are also right to point out that Paul's theology radically reshapes many of the ways Christians are to interact with the world around them—in the first century, for example, making them pray for the emperor and not to him. Nevertheless, Oakes and Porter for example seem to needlessly over-interpret Paul on the basis of contemporary Roman culture.[36] This sort of parallelomania, in the end, results in a denuded interpretation of the Pauline passages about the Christian and government in which, at best, they become about paying a one time tax or, at worst, they become an active protest against the Roman world.[37] Much of the historical information gathered by these thinkers is fascinating and worthy of study. Nevertheless, the readings of Paul which frequently join them too often only serve to make his obvious point less

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[34] Ridderbos, *Paul*, 322.

[35] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology*, 2nd edition (IVP Academic, 2020), 451.

[36] Each of the various essays in Oakes and Porter could likely be accused of this. See Oakes, *Rome in the Bible and the Early Church;* and Porter, *Empire in the New Testament*. For a useful set of correctives, see McKnight and Modica, *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not*.

[37] As Wright does well to warn against in his commentary on Romans in Leander E. Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), 719.

clear. In fact, some even fail to make sense of the historical data already presented in the NT, as Paul in Acts is generally remarkably respectful of office-holders, even going so far as to apologize for speaking ill of the high priest based on the principle that "You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people" (Acts 23:5).[38] As such, while many of the historical methods of this school of thought ought to be considered, along with the data which they present, the hermeneutical usefulness of this corrective has been vastly overstated and must be carefully considered.

Conclusion

Thus Paul's thinking about government is deeply influenced by his broader theological concerns. His focus is primarily theological throughout his writings, considering God, the Christian's relationship with him through Christ, and the spiritual unity that is Christ's church. Paul is not an ardent political theorist. This is not to say that he does not teach about government, or have a theology of it. Instead, as has been seen, Paul presents government as a secondary authority, with a power derived from God himself but simultaneously limited by Him. Believers are called to serve the lord of the land even as they serve the Lord of heaven and earth, their real governor. Government is, in a sense, a shadow of God's far greater role as ruler of the world. It is not the substance, and it is far from perfect. For this reason, believers are called to pray for its leaders, both for their salvation and that they would continue to govern in a manner which would allow for the widespread propagation of the gospel. Believers are to desire justice in this life, along with the salvation of all people, and to live peaceably insofar as it is possible. Still, they

[38] One could respond that this was concerning a high priest of Judaism and not a Roman official. This is true, but misses two key considerations: first, according to Pauline theology, a priest of the Old Covenant no longer held sway, making it doubtful that he would have bowed to him out of respect for his religious sensibilities alone, and second, the priest was functioning in the manner of a government official, overseeing the torture and trial of Paul.

must recognize that the hope of a good government and the hope of the gospel are two markedly different hopes. The former is a matter of this earth, a real but fading good; the latter is lasting good which is kept in heaven for us. While the common good is good, far greater is the salvation of souls. The church would do well to recall these dueling realities, with a focus on training congregants to be good citizens and god neighbors in their own contexts while nevertheless helping them become better citizens of the Kingdom of Christ.