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# To Caesar and to God: New Testament Teaching about the State

MARK C. BLACK

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Jesus and the New Testament writers have little to say about the government—far too little from which to derive a consistent position regarding how Christians ought to relate to it. They live and write out of different historical and social contexts, so that what they do say often tends to move in different directions. The following survey will demonstrate the general nature and content of the New Testament texts that most directly address the relationship between the Christian and the state.

Jesus' only clear discussion of the topic falls during his final week when his enemies are attempting to trap him (Mark 12:13–17 and parallels). When his opponents ask, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” they intend to make him look like a traitor to the people or a revolutionary to the governing authorities. Using a coin provided by his questioners, Jesus answers that they should pay taxes to the Romans. Beyond this, however, he is intentionally vague: “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Implying that there are certainly limits on what one owes the state, he does not define those limits. In this passage, Jesus acknowledges the state’s right to exist and to collect taxes, but not much more. We err when we attempt to find in this story any but the broadest outline of a Christian stance on politics.

The second teaching from Jesus most often cited in the present discussion is Matthew 5:38–48 (see also Luke 6:27–36). There Jesus tells his followers, “Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. . . . Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” While this text does not speak of the relationship between the Christian and government, it is the centerpiece for many who argue that Christians cannot be involved in the government’s use of violence to oppose injustice. The followers of Jesus, it is argued, respond to hatred with love and choose to die for their enemies rather than to kill their enemies.<sup>1</sup>

The force of Jesus’ words surely ought to make Christians think long and hard before arguing for the use of violence. However, there are reasons to question a simple pacifistic reading of this text. Although Jesus surely does intend to demand a radical, self-denying love that accepts insult and even pain, most interpreters agree that Jesus is not giving advice to governments or even individuals who carry out the prerogatives of government. Since Jesus uses hyperbole (does he literally mean that one should not resist an evildoer?), speaks about personal rights rather than communal administration, and rejects Moses’ law of retaliation only when misapplied (see





Matt 5:17–20), it is difficult to maintain that Jesus' words here apply to all situations.<sup>2</sup> This is, of course, not to argue that Jesus at any point *encourages* the use of violence. It is only to say that this particular passage cannot easily be used as the primary basis of a pacifist position.

Those who encourage significant Christian participation in government have pointed out that Jesus does accept the faith of a number of government functionaries in the gospels. Most notably, he eats with and ministers to tax collectors (Matt 11:19), despised by the Jews for their collaboration with the Romans. Jesus also heals the servant of a Roman centurion (Matt 8:5–13) and comments “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.” While it is possible that Jesus in these situations is giving his approval to these occupations, it is more likely that these characters are highlighted precisely because they were regarded as sinners and outcasts who nonetheless came to faith.

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In other words, the point of telling these stories is not to condone these occupations, but to teach that “the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Matt 21:31).

The teachings of Jesus are therefore insufficient for developing a well-defined ethic regarding the Christian and the state. He neither affirms nor denies his followers a role in government. We must look to the New Testament writers themselves.

Although Paul rarely broaches the topic, it is his teaching in Romans 13:1–7 that is first discussed by those who urge Christians to submit to and even

work on behalf of the state. The section that includes 13:1–7 actually begins in 12:1, where Paul first calls upon Christians to love each other (12:1–13) and then to love even their persecutors and enemies (12:14–21). Here he echoes the words of Jesus: “Bless those who persecute you. . . . Do not repay anyone evil for evil. . . . Never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God. . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (12:14–21). It is at this point that Paul instructs Christians about how to relate to the government: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God. . . . The authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath upon the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject. . . . 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” (13:1–7).

It is clear that Paul has heard well Jesus' demand that God's people give to the emperor what belongs to him—they are to pay their taxes and to be subject to the rule of Rome. It is also clear that Paul believes the emperor is in some sense doing the work of God, since the government is God's servant executing God's wrath.

What is not clear is whether Paul thinks that Christians can be a part of the governing authority, especially in bearing the sword. Can Christians hold public office, or does Paul's language assume that Christians are not among “them” that have such authority and wield the sword? Some believe that the prior comments of Paul in Romans 12:14–21 regarding how Christians deal with evil (“Bless those who persecute you, . . . do not repay anyone evil for evil, . . . never avenge yourselves”) are in direct contrast to the ways in which the government deals with evil in 13:1–7.<sup>3</sup> Paul therefore implies that the state overcomes evil with the sword, but Christians overcome evil with good.

While this is a defensible understanding of Romans 13, it is by no means the most likely. Paul's intent is probably not to offer a contrast between government methods and Christian methods. Rather, he is simply discussing in turn (1) how Christians relate to one another, (2) how Christians relate to enemies, and (3) how



Christians relate to government authorities. In other words, Paul does not in this passage discuss whether Christian living and government service are compatible. He is neither for nor against Christians working in government roles.

Do we have hints from Paul elsewhere along these lines? Paul makes almost no mention of Christians serving the government. He only mentions Erastus, the city treasurer of Corinth (Rom 16:23), which at least suggests that he would not forbid such a role. However, our lack of information on the nature of the city treasurer job keeps us from drawing conclusions regarding what Paul might allow or disallow.

Paul speaks of Christian citizenship in Philippians 3:20: "Our citizenship [government] is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." On the face of it, this might suggest that Christians are not part of the governments of this world. The contrast, however, is not between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdoms of the world, but rather between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom that *is* the world. Paul is opposing a group of false Christians whose "minds are set on earthly things." They are proud of their pedigrees, their circumcision, and other concerns that Paul refers to as earthly (v. 19). Paul in fact demanded his rights as a Roman citizen, according to Acts 16:37–39, 22:25–29, and 25:1–12. Perhaps the best phrase to describe Paul's view of Christian citizenship is that Christians have *dual citizenship*. Christians belong to the kingdom of God, but they are also citizens of Rome, the United States, China, etc.

Just as in the case of Jesus, therefore, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from the writings of Paul. Neither Paul nor Jesus suggests that Christians should or should not do more than pay taxes and be generally submissive to Rome. Neither is positive or negative in his view of government.

The teachings of 1 Peter regarding the state are in many ways similar to those of Paul. Peter writes of the authority of the state to punish evil: "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. . . . Fear God. Honor the emperor" (1 Pet 2:13–17). He believes that the emperor and the governors are sent by God to establish justice. However, Peter is writing to Christians who are threatened with persecution, writing in 3:14–18: "But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. . . . For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered . . ." It may be that the state is involved in this persecution, but this is by no means certain. In any event, Peter's comments are too limited for us to know what he thought about Christians serving the state.

Among New Testament writers, Luke is most positively disposed toward the state. Of course, Luke knows that governing authorities are quite capable of demanding what is not theirs to demand. In fact, it is he who records Peter and the apostles telling the Jewish Sanhedrin that "'we must obey God rather than any human authority,'" after being forbidden to speak in the name of Jesus (Acts 5:29; see also 4:19). For Luke, this story demonstrates that the apostles understand well Jesus' demand that what is God's must not be given to any human authority (Luke 20:19–26).

On the other hand, Luke tells many stories of God's people who are civil authorities, several of whom are soldiers or have charge of soldiers. There are enough of these stories to suggest that this forms a Lukan theme. In Luke 3:12–14, John the Baptist is asked by a group of repentant tax collectors, "What should we do?" His answer, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you," suggests not that these men must quit their tax-collecting, only that they must not collect more than is due (see also Luke 19:8–9). Similarly, John tells penitent soldiers to be satisfied with their wages and to refrain from extortion, not to quit being soldiers. Cornelius, the first Gentile convert in Acts (10), is described even before his conversion as "a

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devout man who feared God with all his household,” who “gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.” Nowhere does Luke imply that Cornelius did or should have resigned his command. Likewise, the city jailer in Philippi becomes a Christian in Acts 16:27–34.

Perhaps most importantly, Sergius Paulus, the proconsul of Cyprus, becomes a Christian in Acts 13:12. This governor, the highest-ranking official of the province, commands Roman legions and keeps the peace by force. Once again, Luke offers no indictment of the role. It has been argued by many that one of Luke’s concerns was to provide evidence that Christianity was no threat to the Roman Empire. Repeatedly, Luke makes it clear that Jesus and his followers are innocent of every charge brought against them and that the Roman officials consistently recognized this fact. One of the ways he makes his point is by showing that a number of Roman officials and functionaries became Christians. Luke’s view may be that Christians may

hold most any position as long as they know what is God’s and what is the emperor’s.

**Perhaps the best phrase to describe Paul’s view of Christian citizenship is that Christians have dual citizenship.**

The most negative comments about the state in the New Testament issue from the pen of the writer of the Apocalypse. In Revelation 13, Rome is referred to as a blasphemous beast that “was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them” (13:7). In 17:1–18, Rome is described as “the great whore” who is “drunk with the blood of the saints

and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus” (17:1, 6). Since John wrote while exiled on an island during a time of great persecution of Christians (90s CE), the view of the state is entirely negative. The state had begun to demand that which belongs to God. It is hard to imagine this writer suggesting that Christians should submit to the state because the emperor was sent by God to promote justice.

To summarize briefly the explicit New Testament teaching about the Christian and government, the words of Jesus, Paul, and Peter make it clear that God’s people must submit to the government and pay taxes, but must not give that which is God’s to the emperor. “What belongs to God” is left to the reader to determine. The writer of the Apocalypse is quite negative about the state, whereas Luke is quite positive.

Where do we go from here? We have looked only at texts that explicitly deal with the topic at hand and have purposefully omitted discussion of some major theological themes that must be at the center of the discussion. For example, we have not addressed the implications of the cross of Christ. In taking up the cross, Christians are called to renounce the use of violence to counter evil; instead, they offer up themselves.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the principles of justice and love for neighbor may imply that at times Christians must use violence in extreme circumstances to stop the bloodshed of innocents.<sup>5</sup> We have not asked about the continuity (or its lack) between the principles regulating the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of God. Did Jesus come to show his followers a substantially different approach to promoting justice, or did he stand well within the tradition of the law of Moses and its demands that the people of God punish evildoers? All of these are fundamental considerations for the discussion at hand. Beyond these questions, one must take into account the very different circumstances between the first-century world and our world. What does it mean to live in a democracy instead of the Roman Empire? What should be done when Christians are in the majority? There are no easy answers.

In conclusion, the New Testament has relatively little to say about the state. Furthermore, its specific statements and its broad theological concepts may lead in different directions. Reading the New Testament alone will not give clear guidance to the Christian trying to decide whether to vote, run for office, block entrances to abortion clinics, serve in the military, or a hundred other issues. These decisions must be made based on thinking Christianly, even in the absence of a clear “thus saith the Lord.” With the help of theologians and ethicists, Christians must develop a theological method that is based solidly in scripture and is

capable of producing valid decisions when theological principles collide. It must also take into account our traditions, our experiences, and the clearest possible understanding of the structures of the world we inhabit. Finally, we must allow room for disagreement and learn to appreciate those who differ with us and thereby keep us honest. For now we see in a mirror dimly; only then will we see face to face.

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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 See Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scriptures: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).
- 2 See W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 542.
- 3 Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 330–331.
- 4 This is the central thesis of John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).
- 5 See Paul Ramsey, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Scribners, 1968).

