

“What About Romans 13?”

An excerpt from

Fight the Powers

What the Bible Says About the
Relationship Between Spiritual Forces
and Human Governments

by

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Book Introduction

Biblical Christianity has always understood that the demonic realm exists and that it impacts the physical realm. In American evangelical Christianity, there has even been acceptance of the idea that Satan was in some sense behind the scenes of particularly authoritarian and despicable governments like Hitler's Third Reich or Stalin's Russia. But the scriptures go much further on the subject of the demonic and the state than to merely target the occasional despot as demonically influenced.

What is the state? Is it a divinely ordained tool for justice? A weapon in the hands of demonic forces? Both?

For many American evangelicals, it is taken as a given that state policy is to be crafted with the mindset that America was and is meant to be a Christian nation, chosen by God to do great things.

In contrast, the Christian scriptures seem to present a different vision of the state—a vision where the state is at this present time under the influence of hostile spiritual forces which make a complete union of church and nation both impossible and immoral. But if this is so, how should Christians relate to political power? Would it be appropriate to vote, to lobby for policy, or to serve in the military?

In the following pages, I hope to outline biblical data which posits a close connection between political and demonic¹ power. For those who take scripture seriously, these data should provide a foundation for the models we develop of church and state relations, which is the subject of the second part of this present volume.² For those who don't, I hope you will nevertheless be intrigued by this fascinating, though often ignored, picture of power as presented in scripture.

It has been my goal in the writing and revising of this book to

follow the advice of my Old Testament professor Dr. Phillip Brown: "Make sure you are clear in your distinction between explicit, implicit, and potential conclusions, and provide justification for all assertions." This is particularly important for a topic such as this one due to its controversial nature and implications for Christian practice. I hope I have followed his advice conscientiously. Though my conclusion—that a thoroughgoing relationship between church and state is compromised by the spiritual nature of political power—may be somewhat controversial, it is my hope that the care with which I have handled scripture will bear it out to those who are serious about hearing and obeying the word of God.

“What About Romans 13?”

The key verse which is often discussed in this passage is 13:1 —“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities [*exousia*]” (ESV). Though Dibelius and Cullman suggested a double reference for *exousia* in Romans 13, Carr (in his 1981 *Angels and Principalities: The Background, Meaning, and Development of the Pauline Phrase Hai Archai Kai Hai Exousiai*) makes a persuasive case that only earthly powers, not angelic ones, were the intended referent for this word. If there is a double meaning here, Paul doesn’t give us strong contextual basis for supposing so. However, that doesn’t mean that there aren’t other possible allusions to the notion of demonic powers in this passage.

Paul writes in chapter 13 that Christians should be subject to the state because authorities are instituted by God and carry the sword to avenge against those who do evil. Even taken at face value, this is not an endorsement for blurring the lines between church and state since the preceding verses in chapter 12 distinguish what the state does—use force against its enemies—from how Christians are expected to behave:

“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:19-21 ESV).

If the state is an “avenger” for God (13:4), the Christian is told to be the opposite—to never avenge but leave room for God’s wrath, exercised either on the day of judgment or vicariously through state violence against the wicked. Instead of participating in this state violence, the Christian is called to overcome evil with good. That point should be enough to answer those who are in favor of uniting the powers of church and state, but there are secondary points which may provide additional support for our thesis.

For instance, it should be observed that Paul's statement about God's vengeance is a quotation from Deuteronomy 32:35—from the same passage which gave us the first glimpse of the angelic powers over the nations.³ In the context of Deuteronomy 32:25, God is speaking about punishing the pagan nations for their wickedness and mocking their gods who could not protect them:

"For they are a nation void of counsel, and there is no understanding in them . . . For their rock is not as our Rock; our enemies are by themselves . . . Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly" (Deuteronomy 32:28-35, ESV).

The immediate context of the verse that Paul cited speaks of God executing vengeance over disobedient and immoral pagan kingdoms, like Rome was in Paul's day—meaning that Paul was quoting a passage which seems to claim the opposite of what he was using it for. Is it possible that Paul was speaking in coded language to knowledgeable Christians who understood their Bibles even as he disguised his message from hostile earthly powers who might get their hands on this letter? Was Paul's real point that Christians are not actually subjects of the empire and that the kingdom in which they had their true citizenship would one day destroy the corrupt kingdoms of men for mishandling their sacred responsibilities? Perhaps Paul's point was that those in power *are* responsible for punishing the guilty and not the innocent, but their failure to do so meant that God would hold them accountable when He issued his final judgment against the powers.⁴

There are more clues that Paul may have been intending this section to be read on more than one level. For instance, the idea that "rulers are a not a terror to good conduct," and "do what is good, and you will receive [their] approval" (ESV) not only sounds hopelessly naive, but it also flies in the face of what Paul himself knew and experienced.

To begin with, Paul was a Jew in a land which had been

occupied by a series of pagan oppressors. In addition, the epistle to the Romans was written in the mid-50s, meaning that Paul's experience of being unjustly beaten with rods by magistrates in Philippi (see Acts 16) and his public shaming of those same magistrates was more than five years in the past. Not only that, but prior to his conversion he had been given the authority to oppress and kill Christians, a charge which he now understood to be wicked. After his conversion, he would have understood that his sinless Lord and savior had been crucified by the very rulers whom he claimed "are not a terror to good conduct."

He was also a devout Jew who knew his Bible. He was familiar with stories of Pharaohs and Persian bureaucrats seeking to annihilate his people, of pagan kings being used by God to punish the Jewish people but who went further than God had desired, and of the angelic sons of God who had used their power to persecute the poor.

There is no doubt that Paul was aware of the fact that power is often corrupt and does not do what it is supposed to do, both because of human ambition and demonic influence. This suggests one of two possibilities, though they aren't mutually exclusive—Paul may have been expressing a best case scenario of what rulers *ought* to do, though often do not, or, as T. L. Carter suggested, he may have been writing ironically.

Carter establishes the use of irony as a writing practice in the ancient world and also gives a rationale for its use in this passage—to communicate a message to a specific audience which the authorities, if they had gotten hold of the letter, would not have perceived. The authorities would have been flattered by this rose-tinted portrait of themselves, though many in Paul's intended audience would have known that in practice, and in the passages which Paul cited as proof texts, those in power often do not behave in such a way.⁵

Carter also notes that defenders of the traditional view of this passage highlight parallels between it and the deuterocanonical

book of Wisdom, which claims that dominion is given to rulers by God. But if this is the inspiration for Paul's words here, it must be read in its context:

"Because authority was given you by the Lord and sovereignty by the Most High, who shall probe your works and scrutinize your counsels! Because, though you were ministers of his kingdom, you did not judge rightly, and did not keep the law, nor walk according to the will of God. Terribly and swiftly he shall come against you, because severe judgment awaits the exalted—For the lowly may be pardoned out of mercy but the mighty shall be mightily put to the test" (Wisdom 6:4-6, NABRE).

That Paul would allude to yet another writing to support a contention which it actually contradicts also suggests that Paul was writing with his tongue in his cheek.

Finally, Carter argues that Paul's injunction in Romans 12, to show love and mercy to one's enemies, is the true grounding for Paul's advice to Christians to honor the magistrate in chapter 13. Indeed, if the rulers had behaved as their enemy, what good would rebellion have done? They had no hope of destroying the empire with force, but more than that, "it would have entailed being overcome by evil, rather than overcoming evil with good."⁶ If it was the duty of the magistrate to reward those who do good, and he instead punished them, he would likewise be punished by God for abusing his authority. If the Christian whom he oppressed responded with love to his oppression and threats, this could shame him into changing his behavior. If not, it would only compound the judgment against him. In any case, the responsibility of the Christian was to keep doing good regardless of the consequences—even if the laws of man forbade them from doing so:

"But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than men'" (Acts 5:29, ESV).

In summation, Paul could not have meant in Romans 12-13 that the magistrate always does what is good or even that he should

always be obeyed. In point of fact, the external literature which Paul alludes to teaches that God would judge the state for mishandling its duties. In the mean time, the responsibility of Christians is to be beyond reproach, eschewing violence for love that either shames the oppressor or compounds the coming judgment against him.

About the Author



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1 Scholars debate over the technical application of the New Testament term demon (whether it should be applied only to fallen angels, the disembodied sons of the Nephilim, etc.). An overview of some of these views can be found in chapter IV: The Reality and Identity of Demons in Unger's *Biblical Demonology: A Study of Spiritual Forces at Work Today*. I am using the word to refer generally to angelic powers which are under the judgment of God.

2 I include in the group of those taking scripture seriously even those with a more flexible view of infallibility. Even religiously liberal Christians who deny to some extent the existence of the demonic should still want to grapple with the practical application of the biblical idea of a demonic influence on the political realm, whatever they interpret that to mean.

3 As a reminder, this passage was well-known at Paul's time for its teaching that God had given the nations over to angelic beings while choosing Israel as His special portion. In the new covenant, it is the church which is God's special portion and its members are citizens of His kingdom. We may be encouraged by Paul to, "pray for rulers and for all who have authority so that we can have quiet and peaceful lives full of worship and respect for God" (1 Timothy 2:2, ESV), but we are not encouraged to think of ourselves as a people under the authority of two kingdoms. We are sojourners in a kingdom held by demons and should conduct ourselves as respectful guests. But we are in truth citizens and ambassadors of a different kingdom. It will not do to declare allegiance to a kingdom which is opposed to the one we are claiming to represent, particularly when the kingdom of God will smash the kingdoms of men (Daniel 7), will punish corrupted powers in the heavens as well as rulers on earth (Isaiah 24:21), and since even now Christ's cross has disarmed the powers (Col 2:15).

4 Further evidence that Romans 12-13 should be read in light of Deuteronomy 32 may be found in the former re-purposing the latter's language. In the Greek Septuagint translation of Deuteronomy 32:41-42, God's hand holds fast to judgment (*krimatos*); His sword (*maxairan*) will devour the flesh of the rulers (*archonton*) of pagan enemies. But in Romans 13:2-4, those who resist pagan rulers will incur judgment (*krima*) since rulers (*archontes*) do not bear the sword (*maxairan*) in vain.

5 T.L. Carter, *The Irony of Romans 13*, *Novum Testamentum XLVI*, 3
6 *ibid*