

The Gospel and the governing authorities

Romans 13:1-7

A Sermon for the weekend of the Fourth of July

Today, as our country is celebrating its 250th anniversary, I propose that we take for our text Romans 13:1-7 about the state. This text raises the right questions about how we understand our relationship to the governing authorities of this world no matter where or when we lived.

It is important first of all to understand the perspective from which Paul writes, and also for that matter, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In short, they expected the end of the world to come in their generation.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:51-2: "Lo, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed."

Then in 1 Thessalonians 4:15:

"For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will arise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."

In other words, there shall be some alive from his generation at the time of the Lord's return.

In another way in 1 Corinthians 7:22-24 Paul says (paraphrase): "If you're a slave, stay a slave, if you're because after all you can't bother about all that." Time is short. He goes on to talk about marriage and has these striking places where he says time has grown short. So don't worry about this marriage questions. In 7:31 he goes on: ". . . for the form of this world is passing away."

We find similar things in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. For example, in Mark 9:1: "There are some here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God has come with power." And in Matthew 10:23 Jesus says to the disciples: "You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes."

When we read the whole of Romans 13, the message is: The time is near, be ready; the end is coming like a thief in the night.

You will recognize these texts about the time is short because they are used in the season of Advent. This motif occurs five times in the New Testament. We don't know when the end is coming, but it is soon.

Paul's concern is to get the gospel out. In Romans 15:24 he says: "I want to get to Spain before the end," which was for him the farthest point of the civilized world.

We don't know if he got there, but that was his plan. What happened? The Romans set siege to Jerusalem in 66 and by 70 they had destroyed it and everything changed. But that's the point of view of Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul about the state and our life here.

The passage about the state that everyone knows is: "Render under Caesar. . ." (Matthew 22:21). It is easy to misunderstand this passage. What happens is that the Pharisees come to Jesus with a coin and it has on its face the image of the emperor, which for Jews is idolatry. Even to handle it much less use it is idolatry.

So, the Pharisees tempt him: "Are you going to pay your taxes?" If you do, you're collaborating with the enemy. If you don't, you're a rebel. It's lose-lose situation. He does not answer them, except by a clever evasion: "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21-22). He doesn't answer the question at all, and he is not calling for the separation of church and state, or any of those things. It is not in the mind of the people at the time.

There are other two places that deal with the state. First, Romans 13:1-7 which says the state is instituted by God and when the state uses the sword it is God's servant. That's a major way of saying something in the New Testament. It is also the case that this passage was used widely by the Nazis to say to the Christians: This is what the Bible says.

Second, in 1 Peter 2:13-14: "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right."

These are ways we should honor the state and obey.

On the other hand, in John 18:36, it says: "My kingship is not of this world." In Philippians 3:20: "Our commonwealth is in heaven." In Hebrews 13:14: "Here we

have no abiding city." These passages are just like Paul in Romans 13:11-14. We are ready. The time is at hand. We don't know when it is coming.

But note that in Revelation 13, in contrast to Romans 13, the state is the beast. The state is demonic. And in Acts 5:29, when the apostles are in front of the Sanhedrin, it says: "We should obey God rather than men."

How do we sort this all out? The main point to remember is that in the New Testament the end is near, and the state is not final; it's not God.

What then about Luther? Many people get mixed up about Luther's two kingdoms. They think it's about the separation of church and state, and it's not.

Luther, like Paul, understood that the end is near. We shouldn't be spending our time about the things of this world as if they were that important or as if they were long range. To be sure, Luther, like Paul, said: We have to restrain evil and keep the chaos down, but the most important thing is: We have to get the gospel out. To do this we have to keep things from coming apart, from chaos. But no institution, and Luther had great respect for the state, the family, and the church, could take the place of the gospel which is final.

Luther even said: "I would rather be ruled by a wise Turk than a foolish Christian." Again, what matters is to restrain evil and keep chaos down. To be sure, as Heiko Oberman writes, as Christians we are for the betterment of this world, but we're not about building God's kingdom on earth; we reject utopian visions, even Christian ones.

That has to do with understanding the cross and what it says about law and gospel. As Lutherans we understand that the law is that which tells us through the cross that sin is pervasive; the law tells us we are caught in sin. The law through the cross tells us that. The cross then also tells us that God has saved us, and it is done his way, not by what we do.

And as a consequence, we live in two kingdoms, the right-hand kingdom of the gospel where the Lord works in spite of us. And then we work in God's left-hand kingdom, that is, we work in daily life in this world by common reason and the sword, using the best wisdom we can muster, but knowing, too, that we will fail, and he forgives us.

A modern example is Dietrick Bonhoeffer. As we know, Hitler made sure just before the end of World War II that Bonhoeffer would be executed, and he was executed

on April 9, 1945. Hitler himself only lasted a few months more. What was Bonhoeffer's point of view? He was a deep thinker and an upper-class German, a professor. After all, he knew these passages in the Bible: "Be subject to the state because it was instituted by God. And it is the servant of God." He wrote about these things. Then he realized that the state, in its Jew-hatred, had gone mad, and something else had to be done. He joined the plot to assassinate Hitler, but the conspirators failed and he paid the ultimate price of his life.

From prison toward the end of his life, he wrote:

"... it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman (a so-called priestly type!), a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world – watching with Christ in Gethsemane" (July 21, 1944).

What about us? We remember the perspective we have in the New Testament and in Luther and Bonhoeffer, which is: The end is near. We may, any one of us at any time go, and that's a sobering and important thought.

We also ask: Where is it going in the long range? There are several things we need to keep in mind about that.

First, this idea of the separation of church and state of religious tolerance is not something that can be found as such in the Bible. Nor in the Catholic tradition, nor in Luther. Modern understanding of tolerance and the disestablishment of religion comes from Seventeenth Century, from the Thirty Years Wars (1618-1648). Protestants and Catholics slaughtered each other and about 40% of the population of Central Europe was destroyed. People said: "A plague on both your houses. It can't go this way. We have to say tolerance and no establishment of religion."

So, the separation of church and states comes out of a situation that is relatively modern and out of enlightenment thinking. What we have in the separation of church and state in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States is an experiment that doesn't exist anywhere else in the world. It doesn't exist in Canada or in England. It's in a different kind of form in France where religion is

absolutely forbidden (except in Alsace-Lorraine), as far as anything in the government is concerned.

Our American experiment is a modern innovation. We remember, too, that for Catholics the disestablishment of religion only occurred in the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

This American experiment that we honor and rejoice in is not something that we can say: "This is what always was or something that was destined to be."

Second, we need to remember that civilization is fragile. We tend to think that we've got it made, that Western civilization as we know it can't be lost. The Greeks in the ancient world called this nemesis. But things can and do go wrong.

And we remember Churchill who said: "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the rest." That is to say, all institutions have their problems. We try to make acceptable trade-offs and find that which works. That's true with regard to the state as well as other institutions.

Christianity has worked under various kinds of governments. We have favored democracy and we have a constitutional democracy which is a particular kind of democracy.

What then is the reason that the world even goes on? Second Peter 3:9 reflects on this question and answers: It keeps on because of God's forbearance, because there may be some who repent.

What then should be our perspective? There are three important questions: "Who is the Lord?" "What is salvation?" and "How does salvation work and come to us?"

This is what it means for the long haul, not that we aren't concerned for this world. Of course we are, and we talk about living in this world which is God's left-hand kingdom using, like everybody else, common reason and the sword.

How does salvation work and come to us? Salvation works through the cross. The cross tells us how serious sin is and that we can't handle it. But the Lord has handled it. Thanks be to God. Amen