

Undermining Civil Authority

Romans 13:2a

by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Last Sunday we studied Romans 13:1 "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God", and today we're studying Romans 13:2, "Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed and those who resist will incur judgment."

It's very natural to say, "Ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous. That's exactly the kind of attitude that forced Lech Walesa to be interrogated for hours simply because he visited his former colleagues in the underground Solidarity trade union. It's exactly that attitude that has brought that about -- this business of submission to the authorities at all costs. It's this attitude that enabled Russian tanks to roll into Hungary and Czechoslovakia. It's this attitude that has enabled thousands of rulers down through the years to hold their subjects underneath them. It's this kind of attitude in Christianity that has committed so many people to slavery when they could have been released into freedom. It's this kind of attitude that kings and princes used for years in Europe to keep their people underneath them. It's ridiculous. This kind of attitude in Christianity is the opium of the people. It's what drugs people into passivity: into a passive looking forward to some ideal heaven and therefore an absolute irresponsibility with regard to the utterly unjust temptations in which they're living here on earth."

The difficulty with that response, apart from the fact that it is utterly in opposition to what the Bible says, is the company it forces you to keep. Do you know who said that "religion is the opiate of the masses?" That was Karl Marx. Marx said, "Religion is the opiate of the masses." He said it's this kind of attitude in Christianity that tells people they should be subject to their authorities, regardless, because God has appointed the authorities. It's this kind of attitude that has drugged them into passivity and enabled the rulers to continue to hold sway over them.

The problem is -- we know that that is Karl Marx's justification of violent rebellion by the Proletariat in order to take control of the production techniques of the country. And that that has slaughtered far more human beings than all the Czars put together. It's the justification of violent revolution in order to overthrow the established order that has brought about so much lawlessness and so much anarchy.

In other words, this verse that tells us to be subject to authorities and not resist them because they are appointed by God -- this verse may well be misused by unjust rulers in order to keep their people under them. But this verse certainly tends to stabilize and prolong the rule of law. It tends to encourage people to avoid the violent revolutions that have destroyed so many human rights and thrown so many people into labor camps.

This verse tends to hold humanity back from plunging into the chasm of anarchy and lawlessness that destroys so many lives and so much freedom in godless revolutions. Maybe that's the answer: maybe godly revolutions are alright. Maybe godly revolution such as the American one, which brings about law and a rule of law, are alright. And maybe godless revolutions that bring about anarchy and chaos are the ones that are wrong. That would be a very neat solution and we could all go home for lunch and feel happy about 1776!

Except, loved ones, that isn't what the Bible says. You may say, "Couldn't it be interpreted that way?" Let's look at it in Romans 13:2, "Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed." And you say, "Now could it be that when you resist authorities that God has appointed, you're wrong, you're disobeying him; but when you resist authorities that God has not appointed -- godless authorities that have no submission to law or absolutes in their minds at all -- then you're right?" Except that that's not what the Bible says. The Bible doesn't say, "He who resists the authorities that God has appointed will incur judgment", the Bible says, "Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed." And in the previous verse, at the very end of it, Paul clarified this because he said, "Those (authorities) that exist have been instituted by God." Romans 13:1b

Do you know the ones that existed? Nero -- he was the emperor. Admittedly they were enjoying the temporary peace that Nero had brought to the Roman empire at that time, but in a few years Nero would be illuminating his garden parties with Christians whom he had covered with pitch and set fire to. Yet Paul says, "Those that exist have been instituted by God and if you resist them, you are resisting what God has appointed." Moreover, the Jewish authorities who had just crucified the most perfect man who had ever lived in the world, God's own Son Jesus, were ruling at that very time that Paul wrote "Those authorities that exist now have been instituted by God."

The Sanhedrin gave him authority to go and slaughter the Christians; that was in existence at that very time. Now, you may say, "Wait a minute -- God didn't institute Nero. He didn't appoint Nero to go and slaughter the disciples of his son Jesus." No, he didn't: Nero chose to do that. Nero chose to be that kind of man and to do that kind of work. But God worked that into his plan for the nation in which his son would be born. So you're right: Nero wasn't forced by God to do it; he chose to do it himself. But God then used his free will choice and worked it into his plan.

That's stated very clearly about a man who was actually much worse than Nero -- Pharaoh, king of Egypt. He was a ruler who was not a godly ruler, who was a godless ruler; a ruler who was not a kind or enlightened ruler at all and yet this is what God says about him in Romans 9:17: "For the scripture says to Pharaoh, 'I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.'" And when we studied this verse several years ago, we came to the same conclusion: that Pharaoh chose to do that himself. He chose to slaughter and he chose to keep the Israelites in Egypt as long as he could. He chose to do those things but God used his free choice and used Pharaoh to further the workings that he was carrying out among his own people.

In other words, loved ones, it's failing to see how big our God is to say you can only afford to submit to the authorities that are legitimate, that are legally appointed; the authorities that have gained their power legally. It's bringing God down to our size. As well as that, it's a principle that is very hard to exercise because it means we are the judges of what authority is legal and what is illegal so it's bringing God down to our size.

God, down through the centuries, has been involved in taking the less than perfect actions of man and often the godless actions of rulers and working them into his plan. So it is never right to initiate political action or civil rebellion on the basis of the fact that things have got out of God's control.

There may be other reasons for initiative, but there's no place for ever initiating political or

civil action on the basis of belief that things have got out of God's control -- because things are never out of God's control. God works all things according to the counsel of his will. And you do not need to disobey his word in order to make sure his purposes are fulfilled. He is well able to fulfill his purposes while we obey every detail of his good word.

You may say, "Why does he allow such rulers to exist? Why does he allow rulers that are unjust? I see that you have to submit to them because they're instituted by God -- or at least he has allowed them to be there. But why does he allow people like that?"

Two reasons: one is free will. In Germany in the 30's, enough loved ones in that dear nation used their free vote; it was free will at that time, to vote in a certain Adolph Hitler who then began to exercise his terrorism. Just the same way, lest we're all feeling self-righteous in America, as all of us voted in Kennedy and Johnson and Nixon, who brought about Vietnam and Watergate.

In other words, one of the reasons we end up with rulers that are less than perfect is because of man's free will: we vote them in. We allow it to happen. As Nixon once said, "We do nothing; we just let it develop." Another reason, and maybe the more important one, is the one that Jesus gives in his words in John 18:36, where Pilate was questioning and Jesus answers: "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world." Jesus made it absolutely clear that his kingdom was not going to be established here on earth; that his kingdom was a kingdom that was established in the hearts of men. And that when he came again at his second coming, he would establish, in the millennium, his kingdom here on earth by his own mighty act in his second coming. But his first coming was in order to show the life to men and women that he had made possible for them by his death.

Jesus made it clear, repeatedly, that his kingdom was involved with delivering individual people from the evil in their own hearts: remaking them through his death and his resurrection and making them like his own Father inside. And he was not concerned with establishing a kingdom here on the earth. That's one reason why God is able to use even evil civil rulers -- because he is not about the job of establishing his kingdom here on earth after this, his first coming. He will do that in his second coming but not now.

The kingdom of God is within you. It is the individual deliverance of our hearts from the power of self and of evil; to be translated out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his beloved son. That is why Jesus came. And so he is not concerned with whether every civil ruler is exactly suitable for him to use to build his kingdom because they are not the people that he is using to build his kingdom. Jesus uses the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one who builds Jesus' rule in men's hearts and by whom people are fully formed in Jesus.

Now you may say, "Don't the civil rulers do something? Don't they fulfill some function in God's world?" Yes they do, loved ones, and it's defined clearly in Galatians 3:23, "Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed." Most civil authorities are based originally on the Mosaic Law; whether it's the Magna Charta or whether it's our own constitution, most of it is based on the Mosaic Law.

The civil authorities keep sin under restraint, that's their function. They keep sin from throwing the whole world into anarchy and chaos and bringing about all our destruction before we have any chance to get to know Jesus. That's the purpose of the civil authority: through the law, they keep

sin under restraint. They keep anarchy from breaking out and destroying the whole world and that's their purpose if you look at Galatians 3:21. "Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not; for if a law had been given which could make alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law." Is the job of the civil authorities to build the kingdom of God? No. A law can't do that. If there had been a law that could be given that could make people alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.

If God could do it through the civil authorities, then he would do it. But the only purpose of the civil authority is to hold anarchy back and hold sin from destroying us all while we get a chance, individually, to allow Jesus to deliver us personally from our sin. But the civil authorities can never build the kingdom of God.

I don't want to anticipate the nitty-gritty questions that we'll try to deal with next time: Vietnam, abortion, all those things. But could I say this to you and ask for your sympathy? By law, I am on neither side, okay? I am on neither side because that takes you off the whole center of truth, so I am on neither side. But still, by law you may stop the wee girl killing the baby, but by law you cannot give her life, just remember. By law, you may stop the wee soul killing the baby but you cannot use law to give that wee soul life through Jesus and that's part of it. Part of the meaning is: the civil authority is there to hold back sin and hold back anarchy but it can never give life.

Now that's the mistake the Jews made, do you realize that? That's the mistake the Jewish nation made. They took the laws -- the civil and moral laws that God had given them to preserve society and to keep it back from chaos while he began to give life to individual people who sought him -- they took those civil and moral laws and tried to build a theocracy here on the earth.

A theocracy is a national society and a political society that goes exactly according to God's laws; that is governed by God's laws. And that's what the Jewish people tried to do. They took the laws, civil and moral, that God had given simply to preserve society from anarchy and chaos, and they tried to use those laws to build a theocracy here on earth. And it took centuries of defeat and subjugation at the hands of their enemies to persuade them that the only way that kingdom would ever come would be through the Messiah coming and establishing it by his own hand and by his own power.

It took the Assyrians to come and cross them and take some of the mandates out; the Babylonians to come and take some of the mandates out; the Persians to come, then the Greeks, then the Romans. Year after year after year, God allowed nations to come over and destroy this theocracy that the Jewish people were trying to build here on earth in order to persuade them, "My loved ones, it's only when my Messiah comes and writes these laws on your inward hearts that you will begin to enter my kingdom."

In fact they actually misunderstood the whole plan for God's kingdom so much that even after Jesus resurrection some of his own followers were still trying to play that same tune. You'll see that in Acts 1:6. It really is a heart rending question when you realize that Jesus has spent his life trying to make it clear. And of course his Father had spent centuries trying to make clear that the kingdom, at this his first coming, was to be built in people's hearts through their willing submission to his Spirit -- and would not be built here on earth in civil and political expression.

Acts 1:6, "So when they had come together", and you can imagine Jesus looking forward, "Here I am alive, and they're going to see me", "So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, will

you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" They were still at the same thing. And do you see how he answered? He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority." That is something that the Father will bring about by his own power, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

In other words, he said, "Forget about that civil, political, kingdom building. You go on and witness to the people that I have died for. That's what you're here to do while you're here on the earth." So loved ones, next time we meet, I'd like to try to share a little about the ways in which we can influence the civil authorities as Christian citizens; but here I'd just like to conclude by saying there are two ways in which we can resist the authorities and therefore incur judgment because we resist what God has appointed.

The first is by trying to make them do what they were never appointed to do: that is, to try to use them as an extension of the church of Jesus Christ to build a theocracy here in America. They were never appointed to do this: that isn't why they're appointed. That isn't what they're fitted for. And that's why so many congressmen are not Christians, perhaps. That's why so many Presidents have not been Christians. Because God is able to use them to do what he has appointed them to do: hold back anarchy and hold back chaos so that his Spirit can get to work bringing salvation to individual hearts.

So we resist the authorities when we try to make them do what they were never appointed to do. We try to use them as an extension of Jesus' body to build a kingdom of God here on earth. In other words, we try to do what the loved ones are doing -- or many of them are doing -- in Israel at this moment: they're trying to restore the kingdom to Israel. They won't believe that all the prophecies in the New Testament show clearly that this is something that Jesus will do in his second coming by his own power and by his visible appearance. They won't believe that that's not something that they can bring about by their own manipulation or their own methods and that all this present movement will come to nothing. It has to; because the whole purpose of God's plan is that man's abilities and efforts and powers will be seen to be laid in the dust and man's only hope will be when Jesus comes and delivers us from the anti-Christ and delivers Israel also.

But many of us make the same mistake as loved ones do in Israel: we try to build the kingdom here in America. Loved ones, that's where we get into seeing America as "the chosen people"; "America as the promised land." That's where we get into that and it's not true. Schaffer (Francis Schaffer) is right: "There is no Christian consensus in this country and there may actually never be." And indeed it may well be one of God's greatest plans that there never will be -- that the only way to bring Jesus into a person's individual heart is in the context of the kind of civil and political mix and pluralistic society in which we live today.

The one way in which we can resist the authority is by forcing them to try to perform a function of building the kingdom here on the earth that they were never meant to fulfill. The only function they were meant to fulfill is to hold back chaos and anarchy in order to prevent sin utterly and absolutely destroying us before the Holy Spirit can deal with it.

The second way is by outflanking and circumventing the civil and political institutions by giving up on them and saying, "They're beyond doing anything with" and by withdrawing the glue of the body of Christ that alone sticks the civil and political authorities together and by withdrawing the oil of the Holy Spirit that alone oils and enables the civil and political institutions to operate.

Every time we outflank and circumvent and get around and probably do better without the political institutions, we make another little dent in the only bulwark that God has set up in the world to hold back the Lawless One. And bit-by-bit we pick and pick until that day will come when civil power will no longer be able to hold the thing together. And a man will stand up and say, "America is ungovernable." Or a German will stand up and say, "Germany is ungovernable." And that moment will come when the civil and political institutions are no longer able to do their job of holding back the chaos and anarchy of citizens. Loved ones, we resist those authorities when we pick and pick and subtly and cleverly outflank and circumvent these institutions instead of getting in and making them work.

That's what Paul was saying: "Brothers and sisters in Christ, I know -- I agree with you: it's utterly lawless at times. It seems cruel and unfair. It seems like a godless bunch in government, but it fulfills the function that our God has. And I ask you to submit to it and to support it and to do everything you can to make it fulfill the function that it has to fulfill, which is to preserve society in order to keep it from chaos while the Spirit of Jesus is able to get in and redeem man's life."

Loved ones, will you think and pray about those things? Try to deal with the ways in which we can influence our society. Let us pray.

Father, we want to thank you first of all for this dear country and for all that we have here. But Lord, we see that even this place, beautiful as it is, is not meant to be the kingdom of God here on earth and will never be. And Lord, we apologize if we have, in our enthusiasm, hoped to make the civil government in some way an extension of the body of Jesus.

Lord, we see that if we succeeded in doing that, we would drive all kinds of people away from you as they sense the overbearing, domineering influence of the body of Jesus instead of the winsome, humble, loving influence. So Lord, we would stay away from that. And we thank you for this nation and thank you for its political and civil institutions and thank you that the church is separate from the state. Thank you that there is a reason for that.

We thank you Lord that we express the redeeming grace of God in the church and that the civil and political authorities express the preserving grace of God. Then Lord we would thank you for showing us that we have such a contribution to make to these civil and political institutions that in a way we are not only the conscience of the nation but it is the very love and stability and respect and submission that you have put in our hearts that will enable these institutions to continue long enough for your kingdom to be completely gathered in before the lawless one comes. So Lord, we thank you for that.

We ask you dear Father to give us wisdom and grace not only to understand these things but to do them in a way that fulfills your plan for us in them. Now, the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and evermore. Amen.