

# IT DEPENDS

## *Romans 13*

In chapter 12 I suggested that Paul outlined four basic relationships: to God, to ourselves, to one another, and even to our enemies. In chapter 13 three other relationships are offered: to the state (the conscientious citizen), to the law (loving your neighbor being its fulfillment), and to the day of the Lord's return (living in the "already" and the "not yet").

This chapter has, quite frankly, troubled people for centuries. Do we really need to obey the state, especially when the state is evil? That is so often the question. Some read chapter 13 as suggesting we passively submit to the state. Relations between church and state have been notoriously controversial since the birth of Christianity. John Stott describes four patterns:<sup>8</sup>

1. The Constantine method, where the state favors the church and the church accommodates the state in order to retain its favor.
2. A Theocracy, where the church controls the state.
3. The model where the state controls the church (think Nazi Germany)
4. The Partnership model where each—church and state—recognizes the other's God-given responsibilities.

The fourth sounds a lot like, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Yet I want to push in a little on the question what is a Christian's duty to the state. I would suggest that the answer to this is, "It depends!" One of the most powerful stories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is that of a man named Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 339.

Bonhoeffer was a brilliant theologian doing his post-doctoral work by age 24. As a pastor-theologian he returned to Germany after Hitler came to power and the German Church began to capitulate. Bonhoeffer at first thought he would reform the church from within, then he set up a parallel effort, and finally he actively supported, even participated in, the failed assassination attempts of Hitler. He did not start out in this position, but he ultimately concluded that the evil that Hitler was perpetrating warranted this drastic step.

If I return to the chapter 13, I think it has much more to do with how you can witness the Gospel in the country and system of government you find yourself in. Paul comes from a context where the Jewish people wanted to literally overthrow the Roman authorities and set up a theocracy. He and his people spent a great deal of energy to this end. In fact, many Jewish people could not accept that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah because he was doing the exact opposite. He, Jesus, did not try to defeat the Romans; he let them kill him.

So what is the answer to the question, “What is a Christian’s duty to the state?” As I said earlier, I think it depends. In the first century, when Christianity was not legal, we know that first century Christians took in widows (without a male provider they had few options—prostitution or slavery). In the first century, Christians took in babies left on the streets, orphans. In the Letter to James we read that “true religion is to care for widows and orphans.” (*cf.* 1:27) My point in this example is quite simple; these Christians lived in a state where widows and orphans were viewed as less-than-human. Christians treated them otherwise. The result is that people came to believe Jesus is real, and more people came

to hear the story of God come to earth, and were saved, all because they “put on Christ.”

I said earlier, I think chapter 13 has much more to do with how you can witness the Gospel, then the specific tactics you use to be a citizen. Many good Christians have challenged the state when it is acting ungodly. They just did not seek to become the state. And then I come back to the situation where a Christian, Bonhoeffer, sought to overthrow the state. Then there are those followers of Jesus who used the power of rhetoric to convince a country, such as William Wilberforce. Still, there are others who practiced non-violent civil disobedience.

How did all their actions jibe with chapter 13? Verses 8 -14 of this chapter tells us ending with the key: “put on Christ” and get engaged. The world is full of darkness, darkness that needs the light of Christ.