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Conducted by  
Alf Marsden

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**“Would you please comment on Paul’s teaching in Romans 13:1-5. How should Christian citizens of so-called ‘evil’ governments react to it?”**

This is the basis of a question asked at a ‘Questions Answered’ session in the assembly which I attended. As often happens in situations like that, only part answers can be given, so I am taking this opportunity of giving a more complete answer because of the general importance of the question to all Christians. When we reach the point of considering so-called ‘evil’ governments, we shall need to remember that Nero was the Roman Emperor at that time.

#### The Context

It would be wrong, as it often is, to treat the verses mentioned in isolation. In the last few verses of Rom 12 Paul reminds his readers of their duties regarding Christian citizenship irrespective of their nationality; the primary thought in their minds must be that they are citizens in the Kingdom of God and His Christ, and this thought should govern their actions.

In 12:17 they, and we, are told that Christians should not render ‘evil for evil’ because that subscribes to the law of retaliation, and this would be in direct opposition to what Jesus had said in the so-called Sermon on the Mount. In an earlier letter to the saints in Thessalonica he had said, “See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men” (1 Thess. 5:15). We should note here that the ‘chasing after good’ should start ‘among yourselves’, and then spread to ‘all men’. The message is that Christians should look for the good in their brethren and, indeed, in all men. This is reinforced in v18 of Rom. 12 where it is said, “live peaceably with all men” (if it is possible). There is an echo here of 2 Cor. 13:11, “Finally, brethren . . . live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.”

Rom. 12:19 has, I believe, a direct bearing on the question under consideration, “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord”. If we read this in conjunction with 2 Thess. 1:7-12, we are confronted with a dual application of the wrath of God. Not only will His wrath be exercised against those who do not obey Christ and His Gospel, but evildoers will also be punished here and now by and through whatever agency He chooses. Amid all the exhortations to love, peace, and goodness, God does not exclude the punishment of evildoers, but it must be administered as He chooses. Rom. 12 ends with the instruction to Christians that they should overcome evil with good, for by so doing they engender ‘keen anguish’ in the hearts of their enemies and perhaps lead them to repentance.

#### The Powers That Be

Rom. 13 begins quite explicitly, “Let every soul (every man) be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God”. You will remember that Jesus claimed a ‘higher power’ when He said that He had the power to forgive sins; some of His hearers were incensed because they considered this to be blasphemy against God. You will also recall that Pilate said to Jesus, “knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee?” Jesus did not deny this, and seemed to suggest that the power vested in Pilate had

been given 'from above'. (John 19:10, 11). Peter also exhorts the Christian to submission 'for the Lord's sake.' (See 1 Peter 2:13-25). The 'powers that be', then, are the existing authorities under which we live. Their power is God-ordained, and if we are found to be resisting that power then we are resisting the ordinance of God. Therefore, when someone says to me, "Ah, but when the demands of the State authority conflicts with the demands of God, the Christian has to obey the **higher** authority, i.e. God, I understand what they are saying, but I have to think very seriously about the issues involved because the 'higher authority', God, has also ordained the **earthly** authority under which I have to live, and to whom I am exhorted to submit. What, then, is the purpose of this teaching? Well, Paul goes on to explain.

The Christian would not want to deny that the punishment of evil has always been God's prerogative. Evil, of course, is personified in evildoers, and it is they who must be punished. Paul tells us that this is accomplished by God delegating authority to Rulers here on earth. It is not the slightest use delegating **authority** to do something without also delegating the necessary **power** to accomplish it; only then can the authority exercising the power be held **accountable** before God. Therefore, he goes on, "rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil". Wilt thou then be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good". It is also significant that Paul says, concerning the ruler, that 'he beareth not the sword in vain'; the sword, of course, was the symbol of authority.

It seems to me that the foregoing comments may be summarised as follows:

- (a) The Christian, no matter how provoked, must not retaliate against anyone perpetrating evil against him; he must not be guilty of taking the law into his own hands, because by so doing he would be meeting evil **with** evil, and that God would not tolerate.
- (b) God has ordained rulers and governments to execute His wrath by punishing evildoers. They have been vested with authority and power in order to accomplish this. Christians must accept this even though they may not **approve** of what rulers and governments do. Paul is stating the **ideal** which is set before such people. As I said at the start, Nero was the Emperor at the time Paul wrote this, and they do not come much worse than he was.
- (c) Paul tells Christians that they must be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. He reinforces the argument by telling the Christians at Rome that this was why they had to pay tribute. The paying of tribute money (or equivalent) was an acknowledgement of the submission of one State to another or for protection and peace. The Greek word used in Rom. 13:6 is PHOROUS and refers to imperial taxes which could only be paid in imperial coin. The paying of such taxes was again a recognition of the authority of the State over its subjects, particularly those of a Protectorate such as Judaea under the Procurator, Pontius Pilate. One could argue that Christians at that time should have withheld that tribute money, but Paul exhorts them not to do this. This teaching also tells Christians of today that we should not withhold such things as Poll Tax payments, etc.

Paul concludes with a general exhortation to all Christians; "Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour. Owe no man anything, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law". What a beautiful spirit Christ and the Holy Spirit can engender, if we will only let them.

#### **What About the State?**

We have been considering the punishment of individuals who are evildoers, but what of the **State itself** which is evil? At present we are witnessing momentous events in Eastern Europe. It is now being revealed that Presidents, Ministers and State Administrators of some States have been corrupt and evil in the extreme. Does the

teaching we have been considering cater for revolution by the people in order to remove such repressive and evil regimes, and replace them by better forms of government? Nero, under whose rule Paul was beheaded and Peter crucified, was the atrocious product of an atrocious age, but he was deposed by the people and perished, no doubt with many who aided him. History abounds with examples of leaders who have committed heinous crimes against their subjects until finally overthrown by the people, and I believe that we still see this today. I see nothing in Paul's teaching to forbid this except to say that Christians should not engage themselves in evil deeds in order to depose evil men. It is true to say that the governments of the world have tried, through the old League of Nations and latterly through the United Nations, to curb the evils perpetrated by some States against their own citizens, and against the citizens of other States, but because of the nature of the problem only limited success has been achieved. Nevertheless, a formula for this is still sought, and we can rejoice in that. In the meantime, lawlessness and disorder must not be practised by Christians nor must they take the law into their own hands and try to repay evil with evil, but they must be loving to all, 'for he that loveth another fulfils the law of the Spirit in Christ Jesus'. Leave the punishment to God's ministers on earth.

(All questions, please, to Alf Marsden, 20 Costessy Way,  
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