

Rev John Howell

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Romans 12:1-8

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I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. ³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

The verse I want to focus on today is Romans 12 verse 2.

²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

I want to begin with a quote from the Washington Post:

Texas megachurch pastor Robert Jeffress, one of Trump's evangelical advisors, who preached on the morning of his inauguration, has released a statement saying the President has the moral authority to take out North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

"When it comes to how we should deal with evildoers, the Bible in the book of Romans, is very clear: God has endowed rulers full power to use whatever means necessary – including war – to stop evil. In the case of North Korea, God has given Trump authority to take out Kim Jong-un. Jeffress said he was prompted to make the statement after Trump's 'fire and fury' comments. He said many pacifist Christians would cite Romans 12, which says, "Do not repay evil for evil". but that this passage referred to Christians, not the government. (Dom Post 10 Aug 2017 page B1.)
end quote

The issue that this raises is one that is old as the Church itself. A classic view of the tension between the Christian ethic and the State is found in Augustine.

I went to the lectures recently put on at the University by a visiting historian on Augustine. She put the issue in this way:

A Roman Governor wrote a letter to Augustine in 410AD, asking how it was possible to be a Christian who was asked to love his enemy and at the same time be a Roman soldier?

How can a Christian render evil with good be a Roman soldier who may be asked to kill or harm his enemy?

Augustine went away and wrote the book **The City of God**. I am not sure he answered the question in a definitive way.

Augustine, and this is a very short and imperfect summary, sees the law and order and the peace that is imposed by the Roman State, as a divine gift. And the Ruler is given the authority and power to punish the evil doer, in order to establish peace and order.

Augustine's view is “..the institution of the state marks a relative return to order from the chaos of the Fall. Rulers have the right to establish any law that does not conflict with the law of God. Citizens have the duty to obey their political leaders regardless of whether the leader is wicked or righteous. There is no right of civil disobedience. Citizens are always duty bound to obey God; and when the imperatives of obedience to God and obedience to civil authority conflict, citizens must choose to obey God and willingly accept the punishment of disobedience.” <http://www.iep.utm.edu/aug-poso/>

The difficulty with this approach is the phrase “Citizens have the duty to obey their political leaders regardless of whether the leader is wicked or righteous.” Yet what say the war is an unjust war –or a war not only against an enemy but against Jews or racial groups for example?

What are we to make of verse 2 in Romans 12?

²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

There are some other passages of scripture that give some clues on this.

When Jesus was asked whether we should pay taxes, he replied:

“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.”
Mk 12:17

When Peter and the apostles were brought before the Council, they answered:

“We must obey God rather than any human authority”. Acts 5:29

In Romans 13, the chapter following the one in Romans 12 we are looking at today, does take the view we should obey the authorities, as those authorities have been instituted by God.

JC O'Neill, in his commentary, says of this chapter:

“Romans 13:1-7 is neither Christian nor Jewish in origin. Both Christian and Jewish tradition commanded respect for earthly rulers, but never the absolute obedience laid down in this section.” p208. If you agree with this qualification on the absolute authority of the Governing power, then pastor Robert Jeffress view of Trump using full power to use whatever means is necessary must be challenged.

Let me note that pastor Robert Jeffress, when commenting on the ethic, “do not repay evil for evil”, makes a distinction between this referring to Christians and not to the Government. Now if you say it applies only to Christians and not the government, it appears we have two sets of ethics here – one for the individual and one for the State. Or to answer with the question put to Augustine, “Can you be a Christian and a Roman soldier?, then pastor Robert Jeffress would have to say “No”. He seems to give President Trump all power without qualification. But can the Governing Ruler use any power necessary, such as torture, or weapons such as nuclear bombs that kill many innocent civilians? After all it is one thing for Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un to have a sword fight, it is quite another to drop nuclear bombs on each other.

Now this seems to me to say how we act in the world, such as against people of other nations and how we relate to individuals are one and the same thing. There does not seem to be a distinction for how rulers act from how citizens act. There is not one set of rules for the ruler and another for the citizens.

So, to return to Romans 12:2

We are to transform our minds, and not to conform to this world.

There is here a tension. There is a tension - if I can use a different concept- between the kingdom of God, and the kingdom of earth. Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms was heavily criticised after World War II.

The problem comes from Augustine's view that

"Citizens have the duty to obey their political leaders regardless of whether the leader is wicked or righteous."

In the light of the persecution of Jewish people by the Nazis, the post war Church realised it could not stand aside and watch without preaching on the evils of war, even if that lead to harsh consequences for the preacher.

Our OT reading today was from the Book of Exodus, the story of Moses. Moses was not a chaplain to Pharaoh. His was a civil disobedience movement, a liberation movement, a freedom movement. Many Christians, such as Martin Luther King, have stood in this tradition. And the case may be made, that Jesus also stood in the tradition of Moses and the prophets.

Now in discussing the tension between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this earth, the tension between Church and State, the tension between Christian Ethics and the duties of a soldier, I have not touched on Just war theory, or the distinction between pacifism and nuclear pacifism. Those are questions for another time.

Let me conclude by returning to Romans 12:2.

²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God...

There is a long tradition within the Bible and Christian history of people who have stood in the prophetic tradition of speaking power to the rulers of this world. Many of these people have become martyrs and saints. To do that they have stood outside the military machine. But the question that was posed to Augustine was about Christians who stood within the military. How did they deal with the tension between serving God and serving their government? There are in my view only partial answers that can be given here, perhaps a moral position of dealing with the lesser of two evils, and Christians who diligently try to discern the will of God will arrive at different positions on this matter. The means of how we overcome evil with good is always open to discussion. We are urged in Romans to put our minds to this by a process of renewal to discern the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.