

Introduction:

“When the English Fall” by David Williams tells the story of the End of the World from the perspective of an Amish community. In the novel, the world experiences some sort of Sun storm which knocks out all the power and destroys most electrical equipment. Jacob, his family, and the Amish community in Pennsylvania watch the fallout, relatively unaffected themselves, and Jacob reflects on what this outage might mean for their English neighbors and those he works with building furniture. Soon, though, reports begin coming in about food shortages in the major cities which lead to riots and many seeking shelter in the countryside. With so many hungry desperate persons wandering the countryside, looting starts becoming a regular occurrence and gunshots pepper the night as neighbors try to defend themselves against armed, starving people. When one of the nearby Amish family is executed by looters, the sheriff and locals come to Jacob’s house to let him know that two of the men escaped capture and may be hiding in the fields nearby. Jacob’s English friend join the sheriff in the search for the killers. While this is happening, there is a knock on Jacob’s door; two ragged, desperate looking men are on the step with a gun pointed at Jacob’s son, demanding any food they can supply. After the food is given over, the men command Jacob and his

family to kneel down away from them so they can escape without Jacob knowing which direction they left in. Jacob knows that if they kneel down, they will be shot in the back of the head, just like his friend's family was killed. All of the sudden several shots ring out, and the leader is killed immediately, while his young accomplice is mortally wounded. One of the English boys Jacob had given shelter to steps around the corner, trembling, gun in hand; Jacob's family had just been saved, but at what cost? Jacob and his family bury the two men on their property and then he and the Amish community begin to discern what it means for them, a group of peaceful, simple folk who only own and use weapons to slaughter cattle, to be protected by the guns and life-taking of the English folk. And what compromises might they have to make in the future in order to save themselves and their families? Are they willing to be supported by something so counter to their faith, or was God calling them to move away, to somewhere unknown and even potentially more dangerous/risky, for the sake of preserving their beliefs?

As an elder team we have been asking ourselves the question: what does it look like for a Christian to be different than the rest of the world? Part of the appeal and growth of the early church is that they looked

remarkably different from the culture around them; they didn't look like other religions, they didn't look like society, they didn't look like the government. And yet, in spite of looking completely different from everybody else around them, the early church grew by leaps and bounds.

The challenge we face in the American church today is that we don't look very different from anything around us. We don't even want to look different from the culture around us; instead, we want to use the methods that the culture uses to attract people to the church. We try to use tactics from Hollywood and Nashville: quality music, special effects, entertainment. And we try to use tactics from the political sphere to change culture around us to look more like the church; if we can only get the right person into office, pass the right bills, block the wrong practices, then we will be doing what God wants. The problem is, when we mix and muddle our faith with all of these non-godly arenas, we start looking like a bland version of everything else around us.

And this is nowhere more evident than in the ways that popular Christianity has gotten its hands into political matters and how political matters have infiltrated and influenced the Church. Christians have been

encouraged, when it comes to politics and government, to “choose to lesser of two evils.” But, when we choose the lesser of two evils, we are still choosing evil. We believe we have to pick one of the sides presented to us, Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative, even though no political party or agenda lines up completely with Jesus. When we as Christians decide that compromises are acceptable in order to either attract people to church or influence the government and political world to look godlier, then the church stops looking distinct in America.

So how then should we live? Romans 13 is one of the most challenging pieces of Scripture to read and interpret for the church because, if read out of its context and without a good understanding of Jesus and the Kingdom of God, then it would appear that Paul is endorsing all governments and governmental leaders as being put into place, supported, and even motivated by God. Which raises quite a few questions when you start considering oppressive dictatorships like Kim Jong Un in North Korea, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and especially Hitler in Germany, and the evil that their leadership unleashed on their people and the world. In the Twible, or the Bible written in a series of tweets, Romans 13 says: “Paul says we should submit to government leaders in

authority, for they are G's chosen servants. Tyrants throughout history rejoice." Though this is supposed to be funny, there is a serious truth that misunderstanding of this passage has given license for some pretty evil leaders throughout history to claim their leadership in the name of God.

Then, interpreting this passage becomes even more complicated when our own government does things that aren't blatantly evil from the perspective of secular society, but does not stand in line with the Kingdom of God. When we wage wars in order to avenge an attack on us, promote democracy, or to remove dictators, it might make sense from a military standpoint, but has very little to do with the Kingdom of God which tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. When we take money away from programs that help treat drug addiction and mental illness, it might make sense fiscally for a nation in immense debt, but does not represent the Kingdom of God which calls us to care for the least of these. When our government pushes to build a wall to protect the southern border against undocumented immigrants coming in from Mexico, who might be criminals, it makes sense if our first concern is personal safety, but it makes little sense to a people who follow a God, about whom Deuteronomy 10:17-19 says:

"For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. "He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. "So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt..." And, as we continue to face mass shootings happening in schools across our nation, tearing apart families and ending the promising futures of young lives, the culture is embroiled in a debate about gun rights and personal freedoms, but in the Kingdom of God, there is no 2nd amendment.

It should be clear, to anyone that no government truly aligns with the Kingdom of God and yet we have Paul's words in Romans 13. And so we tend to make one of two choices on reading and interpreting Romans 13. First, we read it at face value: God made the government good and we have to follow her laws because they are God's laws. Then, when presented with sticky issues like immigration, war, and fiscal reform, we turn to political reason rather than the words of Jesus. And when presented with even more difficult situations like Hitler and Nazi Germany, we either ignore it or we try to say that God put Hitler in place for some purpose,

which presents a pretty awful and clearly misunderstood view of the person of God and how He works in history.

The second way that we read Romans 13 is that WE DON'T. We ignore it as one of those difficult Pauline passages that's better left undiscussed and unfollowed. I think that this presents a problem too, because it is a part of the Bible, and we cannot just start tossing out sections of Scripture, no matter how difficult it is to wrestle with.

I believe that there is a third option on reading Romans 13, which neither takes it at literal face value nor discards it, but looks at Paul's words in context with the rest of the Letter to Romans as well as in light of Jesus' words and God's interaction with nations in the Old Testament. I want to challenge us to listen with new ears to Paul's words in Romans 13 and consider a different way of thinking. Because if we hope for the church to be effective in the world today, then it cannot look like America, in the same way that the early church didn't look like Rome.

1) Pauline Context: Overcoming Evil with Good

First let's consider the Pauline context of Romans 13. The thesis statement or the idea that directs 13:1-7 is actually found in Romans 12:21. Paul writes in Romans 12:21: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." As a church, our approach to the evil of the world is not to fight fire with fire, but to fight darkness with light. What follows, in Romans 13:1-7, is an example of how this principle would play out in the lives of believers. Paul writes in this passage that if a believer and the church hope to be an effective witness to and under whatever government they find themselves, they have to live and act in a way that reflects the goodness of God, not the evil of the world. So what does this look like?

Well, Paul commends the church to be obedient to the authorities and law, for they have been placed there by God. For an example in v. 7, Paul commends the church to pay their taxes because taxes were put in place by the government to keep it running.

What do believers do when the government requires to do something that violates their faith? In the book "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep" by Philip K. Dick, the character Wilbur Mercer makes the statement: *"You will be required to do wrong no matter where you go. It is the basic condition of life, to be required to violate your*

own identity. At some time, every creature which lives must do so. It is the ultimate shadow, the defeat of creation; this is the curse at work, the curse that feeds on all life. Everywhere in the universe.”” Paul does not explicitly outline what the church is to do in these situations, but we see in the apostles, in Paul, and in the early church, that when believers are required by law to do something that goes against their beliefs, they break the law and then accept the consequences of doing so. For instance, when Roman emperors forced all residents to burn incense as worship to the god Emperor as a way to root out and kill Christians, believers who did not burn the incense were executed. However, these believers willingly went to their deaths because even though they broke the law, they were still willing to submit to the punishment under that law.

Contextually, we need to understand that Paul was writing this passage with the history of Israel in exile in mind. He and the Jewish Christians remembered the many years that they were ruled over by the Babylonians and the Persians, and so he was describing how their current position under Roman rule would be like that. Paul isn't writing about the new Kingdom that Christ had ushered in, or prescribing how that future Kingdom would be different than what they had experienced before. He wasn't naïve to the Pagan nature of the

Roman government, nor was he trying to baptize the government's actions. Paul is helping the church to deal with living in the Kingdom of the world now.

Transition: So, how could Paul write for the church to follow the law, yet he himself broke the law and knew that it would be necessary in the future for the church to break the law when it violated God's law because the authorities instituted by God did not follow God? Paul did this because even though he writes about authorities being instituted by God, he also recognized that he and we are living in a world that is ruled by two Kingdoms fighting for power: The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the world.

2) Two Kingdoms:

Even from the very beginning, God's desire was that His people be separate from the Kingdom of the world, but the people demanded something different. For much of Israel's early history, she was governed not by a king, but by a judge appointed by God to discern God's will for the people. Israel was a true theocracy, led by God through the guidance of a judge. It wasn't until 1st Samuel chapter 8 that God gave Israel a King and government like the other nations around them, and it really wasn't a good thing. In 1 Samuel 8:4-5, the elders of Israel got together and conspired against the priest Samuel saying

that he was old and his sons were unfit to rule, and they demanded a King to rule them. God tells Samuel in vv. 7-9: “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

It needs to be understood that Israel’s demand for a king was at its heart a rejection of God, and God’s willingness to give them a King was a form of punishment. God tells them in vv. 10-17 that the king they so desire will take their children from them for servants and soldiers and will take the best of their crops as a tax. And then he says in v. 18: “And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.”

So, when Paul writes in Romans 13:1 that “those authorities that exist have been instituted by God” and in 5-7 that the authorities are God’s servants, he is accurate. The order of governments was given by God as a punishment to Israel, and governors, therefore, are

servants of this institution, again, not because they are blessed and ordained, but because Israel rejected God.

Jesus also makes a case that the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the World would be different from one another. Towards the end of Matthew 20, James, John, and their mother request that they would be able to sit at the right and left of Jesus in heaven. Jesus rebukes them, saying in vs. 25 that, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.” Jesus rejected the requests of James and John because they wanted power like an earthly authority, and Jesus wanted them to understand that the Kingdom of God would not function like the kingdom of the world.

We need to then understand that when Paul writes about God instituting authorities in Romans 13, he isn't saying that what they do represent the Kingdom of God. However, he does use this worldly kingdom as a tool for his purposes. Remember, authorities were put into place to create and keep order. But we know that is not always done in a Godly fashion. God does not endorse every governmental action, and we shouldn't either. Submission to authority does not mean that we always agree with or go along with every decision. I would also say that submission does not mean participation. And

when we choose not to participate, Paul is telling us then that we are subject to the punishment of the governmental authority.

Jesus makes the clearest distinction for us between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world when the Pharisees, who were trying to wield the power of the government, and the Roman soldiers came to arrest him. The Roman governor Pilate questions Jesus as to if he was a king. Jesus replies in John 18:36: "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place." If the Kingdom of God looked like the Kingdom of the world, then God would never have allowed Jesus to be arrested, put on trial, and crucified, because in the Kingdom of the world, death is defeat, and power is ultimate.

Transition: If we, as Christians, are supposed to be citizens of the kingdom of God, how then do we act while living in the kingdom of the world?

3) Submission and Surrender

Again, we need to begin by considering what Paul's words meant to the original readers. **Firstly**, remember that Paul has already been working to establish the church as the new people of God, the new Israel, which

included both the Jewish and non-Jewish Christians. The challenge that the Jewish-Christians were going to face was that as an ethnic minority group in the empire, they were afforded special privileges to worship and practice their laws as they pleased under the protection of the Roman authorities as long as they abided by certain laws. This new church, comprised of Jews and Gentile Roman citizens, would not be considered an ethnic group and would therefore not receive the protection of the government. So first and foremost, Paul is telling the church how to live under a government that could and would, at its own whim, make life and worship very difficult for them.

Secondly, remember that in the Roman empire, people did not have the ability to exert political power or influence on power and decision making like we do today. It wasn't even in their realm of thinking to work with or against the empire to make a political change; they just knew that they were stuck in whatever social position they had been born into, and so Paul was more or less telling them to live in their position and be content as to how the authorities were going to treat them. This was a pretty common teaching in the early church. Paul's exhortation wasn't to bolster the power of the authorities, as is often used today, but to encourage the daily lives of believers living under the power of godless,

unpredictable authorities. Submission wasn't about the "goodness" of the authorities but the livelihood of the believers.

Submission to authorities, then, is simply about how the church should live in relation to authority. It doesn't say that we should endorse the decisions made by government, participate in the government, or influence the government. Simply, we should live in such a way that we don't rouse the ire of the government. Though we might have to submit, then, to the kingdom of the world, our ultimate allegiance is to the Kingdom of God. We are to surrender our whole selves to God.

Submission only involves, our bodies, surrender demands our hearts, minds, and souls. Jesus tells us in **Matthew 16:24** that the price of following Him is total surrender. "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me."

So, what does this mean for the church today? If the church hopes to be an effective arm of Jesus's gospel in the world, then we need to stop trying to be like the world. We cannot pretend to be a part of the Kingdom of God if we are so intent on being a part of the kingdom of the world through the government. Our job isn't to elect certain officials, change legislation, align with certain parties, or adopt agendas. It is to share the love

of Jesus with our neighbors, which means the gospel of salvation and the physical good news of a God who heals, feeds, visits, comforts, and welcomes. This should challenge all of us, because so many different persons, parties, and agendas are fighting for our support. But we need to stop choosing the lesser of two evils, and we need to start surrendering fully to Jesus.