

**‘LET EVERYONE BE SUBJECT TO
GOVERNING AUTHORITIES’:
THE INTERPRETATION OF NEW TESTAMENT
POLITICAL ETHICS TOWARDS AND AFTER
ZIMBABWE’S 2002 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS**

Lovemore Togarasei
Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy
University of Zimbabwe

Abstract

This article is aimed at analyzing the way New Testament political ethics were interpreted by Christians towards and after Zimbabwe’s 2002 Presidential elections. The research focused on the debates, by Christians, I observed and sometimes participated in. In the first section I give a brief background of the political situation in Zimbabwe before and after Zimbabwe’s 2002 Presidential elections. This section is followed by a historical-critical interpretation of New Testament passages on political ethics. The third section looks at the pro-ruling party interpretation of the political ethics followed by the anti-ruling party interpretation. The last section is a theological reflection on these ethics in the context they were used in Zimbabwe.

1. Introduction

Beginning early in the history of Christianity, the New Testament came to be used, “...as a reservoir of texts for the illumination and resolution of ethical problems and the provision of moral guidance.” (Houlden 1996:206). The Bible in general and the New Testament, in particular, continue to be treated by Christians as a source-book of legal instructions. West and Dube (2000) have looked at the continued influence of the Bible in African Christianity. In Zimbabwe, those taking oaths swear by the Bible showing that even the state regards it as a source for morality. It is not even surprising that many politicians quote Biblical passages when commenting on political matters, for example ZANU PF supporters’ likening of Mugabe to the Biblical Moses (Chitando 2002:10). No wonder, towards and after Zimbabwe’s 2002 Presidential elections, when the political situation was so polarised, Christians interpreted New Testament political ethics very differently depending on their political persuasions. This paper is therefore aimed at analysing the way New Testament political ethics were interpreted by Christians towards and after Zimbabwe’s 2002 Presidential elections. It is based on the debates, by Christians, I observed and sometimes participated in. These were not formal debates, so this explains why I quoted no one’s name.

I approach this subject informed by the reader-response method of interpreting texts. This method sees texts as open to more than one meaning and that the reader is constrained by psychological needs in his/her reading of the text that the text is then forced to meet (Davies 1990:577). In Zimbabwe, towards the elections two types of interpretations emerged because of ideological needs. The first interpretation I call it “pro-ruling party” type of interpretation and the second I call “anti-ruling party” type of interpretation.

To achieve our objective I follow the following scheme. In the first section I give a brief background of the political situation in Zimbabwe before and after Zimbabwe's 2002 Presidential elections. This section is followed by a historical-critical interpretation of New Testament passages on political ethics. The third section looks at the pro-ruling party interpretation of the political ethics followed by the anti-ruling party interpretation. The last section is a theological reflection on these ethics in the context they were used in Zimbabwe.

2. The Political Situation in Zimbabwe Towards and After the 2002 Presidential elections

Before looking at the political situation around the 2002 Presidential elections, let us make a few steps back to the time of the birth of the nation of Zimbabwe in 1980. This enables us to put the discussion of this paper into the proper context. Zimbabwe was born in 1980 from British colonialists who colonised the country and named it Rhodesia in 1890. RG Mugabe's ZANU PF and J Nkomo's PF ZAPU brought the independence after a protracted war. Mugabe's party won the majority votes and was the first Prime Minister and subsequently president of the country.

From 1980 to 1990 Mugabe was the beacon of Zimbabwean and even African politics. Though there were and there appeared a number of political parties, these were insignificant in the eyes of many Zimbabweans. In fact Zimbabwe was actually a quasi one party state. Growing up in the rural areas of Zimbabwe myself, I could not see the differences between ZANU PF, the party, and the government. The only party which posed some challenge to ZANU PF was Zimbabwe Unity Movement in the 1990 parliamentary and presidential elections. But still had a landslide victory except for the two constituencies of Chipinge which remained in the hands of ZANU NDONGA. Mugabe's grip to power was strongly tested with the formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 2002. With the challenge posed by this party, the political situation in Zimbabwe became tumultuous. Coincidentally prices of basic commodities began escalating. The education system, the health delivery system and all other government systems deteriorated amazingly. No doubt, a losing hope and confidence in the party and many of them abandoned their party and joined the new party. The MDC drew a lot of supporters mainly from the working class particularly the urbanites elections where the party managed to snatch 57 seats from the ruling party.

Against the above background started the invasions of white owned farms at the blessing of the ruling party. ZANU PF started making changes to the Lancaster House constitution to enable it to compulsorily acquire land for the resettlement of indigenous Zimbabweans. The MDC interpreted this as a political gimmick meant to win voters. During this period the MDC was gaining ground in the political field. This saw clashes between members of the two parties. A lot of people died because of political violence with the two parties accusing each other for the murderous activities. During farm invasions a lot of white commercial farmers were murdered in cold blood. There is no doubt that some criminals took advantage of this situation to perpetrate crimes. These circumstances continued till election time. When the results were announced, the two parties were separated by about 400 000 votes with the ruling party emerging the victor. The opposition party rejected the results accusing the ruling party of using violence before and having the elections. They also complained that the ruling party had rigged the elections, and had frustrated the urban voters (whom it considered to be supporters of the opposition party), by reducing the number of polling centres. The opposition party even challenged the results by

filing opposition papers in court calling for the rerun of the elections. The ruling party, however, dismissed all these accusations saying this is how losers respond to defeat.

In this situation the Church surely could not be left out. A number of church boards and individuals made public statements both before and after the elections. However, in the church two different types of interpreting New Testament political ethics emerged. Before we look at these interpretations, let us first look at which passages these are, what they say and how they have been interpreted in the history of New Testament studies. This will help us to see how Biblical interpretation is influenced by the interpreter's psychological and ideological needs.

3. New Testament Passages on Political Ethics and how they have been Interpreted using the Historical Critical Method

Romans 13:1-7 is our guiding flame in this paper. The title of this paper is, in fact, from this passage. The passage has exerted the greatest influence in the topic of the Christian and the state. In it Paul says the state is an institution appointed by God and that he recommends for the Christian unqualified subservience to it. Paul's attitude, however, has raised and continues to raise a lot of questions. Considering that Paul is regarded as the most influential source of Christian morality (Togarasei, 1995:1), scholars question what Paul meant by governing authorities and why he was so optimistic about them. So through the history of Christianity various interpretations have been given to this passage since it has been the source of much church-state reflection.

For JL Houlden (1973:81), Paul's optimism can only be understood against the context in which he wrote. He said two aspects of the context in which Paul wrote bear upon his judgement. The first aspect is that by this time the church was small in size that it could not make any political influence. Subservience therefore was the only thing the church could do. N Perrin and D Duling (1971:203) also support this view saying that a minute Christian movement that had as yet had no major conflict with mighty Rome would naturally pick up the Hellenistic Jewish position of submission in relation to the empire. The second aspect was Paul's expectation of an imminent end. He believed there was a short time before the end and so Christians were to bear with the authorities. There was no need to call for any social or political change since the time was up.

The other interpretation that has been given to this passage is that Paul could have been content with the benefits of life he had enjoyed in the Roman Empire. He was therefore a man of his own time. GHC Macgregor (1954:599-600) says:

We cannot doubt that Paul, the traveller, found himself often thanking God for the unification of the world which Rome had brought about and for the comparative safety of the seas and the roads for which Roman action against pirates and robbers had been responsible. He would also be grateful often for the protection which Roman magistrates gave him when he was threatened by mob violence.

Macgregor therefore believes that by governing authorities, Paul was referring to the Roman Empire, that is, human authorities and that today the governing authorities would be our reigning governments.

There are, however, other scholars who offer other interpretations. O Cullmann (1955:41) thinks that apart from human authorities, Paul also had in mind the invisible angelic powers at stand behind the state. Be that as it may, Paul must have been thinking about the Roman government. He could have been influenced by the Old Testament conviction that God is ruler of all nations and all history and that in order to protect his creatures from sin, he provides them with civil rulers, just as he provides them with the sun

and rain (Barret, 1962:245). W Lillie (1961:87) is however, of the opinion that Paul could not have been hundred percent optimistic of governing authorities but, probably in an apologetic way, thought they were actually checking wrongdoing, and in some measure encouraging morality. He gives the example of bad and tyrannical government, like Nazi Germany and says that thieves and murderers in a non-political way found themselves in prison, while people who did real public service were commended so long as they did not deviate openly from the party line. He concludes, "A bad government may appear to the Christian a lesser evil than no government at all" (Lillie 1961:87). If Paul thought this way then his views were similar to those later expressed by Rabbi Hanina in about 66 A.D., "Were it not for the fear of the government, a man would swallow up his neighbour alive" (Furnish 1979:129).

Other New Testament passages on political ethics are 1 Peter 2:13-17, I Timothy 2:1-2 Titus 3:1-2 and others which are not directly political. I Peter and Titus express the same view of the Christian's proper attitude toward the government as Paul had expressed a generation or two earlier. On the other hand I Timothy is an exhortation to give thanks and to pray for the Roman authorities. Lillie says that this was in accordance with the Jewish custom and Christians had reasons to be thankful for the law and order established by Rome.

The New Testament passages analysed so far show that the early Church teaching was that Christians should be obedient to the governing authorities. However, in the book of Revelation, the writer shows a different church attitude towards the state. In Revelation 13 for example, the state is portrayed as a slave of Satan (Sweet 1979:206). The Roman state which Paul had regarded as the servant of God is now an enemy of God. Lillie says the state had now exceeded the God-appointed limits of its power by claiming authority over the souls of people as well as their property. He suggests that the Roman power had perhaps reached its lowest ebb as the provider of bread for a greedy proletariat going beyond its sphere. In such a state, the writer of Revelation shows that a Christian may then refuse to obey the commands of a government over-reaching its authority. Earlier in the history of Christianity the apostles had actually take such a stance saying, "whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than God, you must judge..." (Acts 4:19).

In the light of the passages discussed above, it can be seen that Christians are part and parcel of their political environment, and as we have noted in the introduction, the Christian's contact is almost always based on his/her interpretation of scripture. In the next section we therefore analyse how Zimbabwe Christians who were "pro-ruling party" interpreted these passages in the political environment towards and after the 2002 Presidential elections.

4. Pro-ruling Party Interpretation

Though we have analysed other New Testament passages above, Christian reflection on the relationship between Christians and the state is no doubt mainly based on Rom 13:1-7. No wonder towards and after Zimbabwe's 2002 presidential elections this was the passage mainly used to discuss Christian political ethics.

For those who support the ruling party verse 1 lays down the general thesis of Christian submission to the supreme authorities. In their opinion only officials from and representing the ruling party qualify as the governing authorities Paul was referring to. Whereas for interpreters like M Black (1973:18) the ruling authorities are "...clearly the governing or civil authorities wherever the Christian congregation or Christian believer is located", the pro-ruling party interpretation was that such authorities should be from the ruling party. It

is interesting that even in areas where civil authorities like city councillors and Members of parliament were from the opposition party, the pro ruling party interpretation of Romans 13:1-7 did not regard these as the ruling authorities Paul was referring to. For them there is no distinction between the state and the ruling party. Submission to the governing authorities was explained as doing what the ruling party requires. This includes attending the ruling party rallies (even when it calls for the cancellation of church services). Most of all submission for them is seen in voting for the ruling party at district council, city council, parliamentary and presidential elections. This is because the ruling party is divinely instituted and whoever resists it resist God, they would say. In other words, voting against the ruling party was considered as voting against God. The statement, "He who resists authorities resists what God has appointed and will thus incur judgement" was also interpreted literally. Violence which led to the arrest, beating up and even death of supporters of the opposition party was considered to be God's judgement expressing itself through human punishment. Whoever punished in any way those who supported the opposition party was considered an instrument of God. Supporting and even being sympathetic to the ruling party was considered a sinful act and so whoever did so was supposed to be afraid of the governing authorities, "...for he does not bear the sword in vain..." (V.4). According to this interpretation denying the ruling party one's vote was comparable to refusal to pay taxes, revenue and honour to the governing authorities.

The pro-party interpretation of Christians' attitude to the state, however, did not make any reference to the book of Revelation where the church resisted the state. Emphasis was therefore on submission shown particularly in supporting and voting for the ruling party.

5. The Anti-ruling Party Interpretation

In the same political climate those opposed to the ruling party interpreted New Testament passages on political ethics differently. The anti-ruling party interpretation saw in Rom. 13:1-7 not the ZANU PF government. According to this interpretation, the passage must be interpreted at two levels. First the interpreters say the governing authorities Paul did not refer to the party but to a state guided by the constitution of the country. The ruling party, according to them can remain a divinely instituted governing authority only as long as it upholds the constitution of the country. In this case they regard the governing authorities to be the civil magistrates who are there to make sure that every citizen including the head of the state remain under the laws of the country as stated in the constitution. Those who follow this interpretation say they do not believe that a heavenly appointed government can be corrupt and abusive of its citizens. They say God appoints governments through a democratic system of free and fair elections. They say surely God cannot come down to appoint governing authorities. God is present in people and when people go to the ballot boxes God will be appointing for them governing authorities. Thus, for them, a government which gets into office through undemocratic and corrupt means is not a divinely instituted government and Christians have the divine right to resist it. In such cases they can even withdrawn their taxes, revenues and honour since these will not be put in right use.

At the second level they say Paul was optimistic because of his context. He was under a government which had promoted the Christian faith. It was because of the peace created by the Roman Empire that Christianity was able to penetrate the Roman world unhindered. Thus Paul, as a man of his own time, saw reality and established ethical principles on the basis of what he saw and experienced. They say for sure if Paul had lived up to the time of the Domitian persecution when Revelation is believed to have been written, he could not have taken a different stance from that taken by the author of this book. The author spoke

against such a power but using only a cryptic language such as referring to Rome as Babylon (17:5), as a beast (13:11) and such other apocalyptic terms. The Christians were forced to worship the Emperor and those who refused faced death. Surely, they say, if Paul was alive he could not have maintained the view that such a government was divinely appointed. Thus they concluded that there is a point at which Christians are justified to resist governing authorities. In fact, for them, governments over-reaching their authorities are not the governing authorities that Paul was referring to in Rom. 13:1-7.

On the issue of God punishing wrongdoers using governing authorities (v. 4) they interpreted this pointing out that in the Zimbabwean context wrongdoers like robbers, corrupt government officials, murderers and rapists who belonged to the ruling party were not being punished. They even argued that since the duty of divinely appointed governing authorities is to punish such people, it was clear that the ruling party was not the kind of governing authority Paul had in mind.

In short therefore, the anti-ruling party interpretation of Rom. 13:1-7 was that the governing authorities Paul was referring to are the state structures like the constitution and civil magistrates that call for the equal treatment of all citizens not an autocratic government that ruins people's lives. Paul was a man of his own time as can be seen in his attitude to slavery in the letter to Philemon. He could not have reacted differently from the author of the book of Revelation had he lived to see the Roman government of that time.

6. Theological Reflections on the New Testament Political Ethics in the 21st Century

I have looked at how people interpreted the New Testament passages in a politically polarised context, but how should we, as scholars of the New Testament, look at these passages from an academic and missiological perspective in the 21st century.

The two different interpretation of New Testament political ethics prove that there are many approaches used to "apply" the New Testament to present day situations. J Botha (1994:40) pointed out four approaches to the relation of the Bible to ethics. The first one is the prescriptive approach which sees Rom. 13:1 and other ethical passages as law and command of God that has objective status and to which believers have only to refer and to follow always and in all circumstances. The second approach is an ethics of principles or ideals which sees the appeal in Rom 13 to "submit to governing authorities" as having a general and universally valid principle behind it. The notion is that Christians should have respect for authority, whether it be the authority of government, parents, school head or guard. The third approach is "revealed reality" rather than "revealed morality", which interprets Rom 13:1 in the context of what it supposedly says about God. Lastly is the approach of "relationality and responsibility" which focuses attention on the Christian's response to the God who has given the gift of faith to the believers. Here the Bible has to be used in a way which helps the Christian community to interpret God in its existential faith and not as providing a revealed morality that is to be "translated" and "applied".

It would appear the pro-ruling party interpretation follows the first two approaches. These approaches, however, are very problematic since the contexts in which the New Testament books were written and the problems they were meant to address are now completely different from ours. As pointed out in the anti-ruling party interpretation, by the time of Revelation, the Pauline teaching was found inapplicable. Thus the early church approached the problem of the state inevitably influenced by its own background of experience. As Macgregor (1954:598) says, "(by the time of Paul) the state appeared to be a beneficent power, a bulwark of order and, on the while, a minister of justice ... explaining

why there is a different attitude in Revelation.” I therefore here support the fourth approach and see the words of Paul in Rom: 13:5 (“...not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.”) as supportive of this approach. The call for conscience here means the Christian is to interpret events in his/her life basing on moral judgement with faith in God. This agrees with the stoic thoughts of conscience as the individual’s sense of right and wrong, his moral judgement, his recognition of inherent claims of good, and the grounds for rejecting what is wrong (Black 1973:160). In fact most of our evidence points to the conclusion that the early church decided that in those situations where the rights of conscience were invaded the state must be resisted, but in other matters, the Christian must accept the obligations of his citizenship. Lillie (1961:91) reminds us, “No one who enjoys the security and conveniences which an organised government provides has the right to refuse to pay his share of the cost of these things, however, much he may disagree with the government’s general policy.” Christians can therefore not be observed in the political system but are called to participate constructively. In the electoral systems as the anti-ruling party interpretation shows, the only way that God can appoint governing authorities must surely be the way of democratic elections. Human beings are all creatures of God from a Christian perspective, and as for Christians, they are the representatives of God on earth. Therefore as Christians vote in a democratic system, God uses them as instrument for his appointment of governing authorities.

I therefore conclude that Christians must participate in the political system particularly in the election process by voting. However, they must guard against being involved to the extent of being partisan publicly and dividing people. They must publicly remain aloof from the political set-up of the time just as Jesus, in spite of the attraction of the Zealotic policy did. Yes, he made comments about the rulers of the time, for example, when he referred to Herod Antipas as. “That fox” (Luke 13:32) just as Revelation refers to Rome “as the mother of harlots” (Rev. 17:1,5). However, in most cases he was concerned with the Pharisees’ honesty and readiness to make restitution than with their relations to the Roman authorities (Luke 19:8.9). I am against active public participation because, in the Zimbabwean context for example, this would involve a Christian in making statements like, “Down with X or Y” statements which surely must not come from a Christian whose major business should be to build the kingdom of God on earth.

7. Conclusion

It can be seen from the analysis made by this paper that written texts are open to more than one interpretation. True to the observation of reader-response critics, people’s interpretation of texts is influenced largely by their psychological and ideological needs. This was how Romans 13:1-7 and other New Testament passages on political ethics was interpreted in the history of New Testament Studies and towards and after Zimbabwe’s 2002 presidential elections. These interpretations were influenced by the interpreters political ideologies. Thus two types of interpretations, the pro-ruling interpretation and the anti-ruling party interpretation emerged in Zimbabwe. As a conclusion the paper has suggested that Christians, guided by conscience, should participate in the political system, not in a divisive manner but in a way which builds the kingdom of God on earth.

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