

THESES ON ROMANS 13

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Abstract

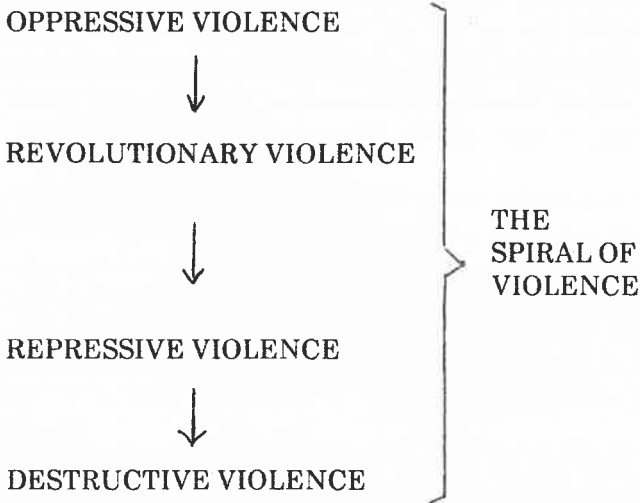
Romans is the text most frequently used to legitimise authoritarian rule. These theses argue that a democratic system is more in line with the intention of Romans 13, because both the sin of the ruled and the rulers are controlled. Under democratic presuppositions Romans 13 legitimises the overthrow of an illegitimate government, subject to the other criteria of the 'just war' theory.

INTRODUCTION

Christians are motivated by the redemptive love of God in Christ. They will always attempt to overcome conflict, hatred and violence. To do that effectively they have to go to the root of the problem.

Conflicts in society are frequently caused by structural imbalances, which deny certain groups social status, economic opportunities and political participation. This is called structural violence.

Structural violence often leads to a spirit of violence. If the privileged and powerful abuse their power to pursue their own interests at the expense of an underdog population group, this is called **oppressive** violence. If oppression becomes severe, the subjects may be tempted to try and overthrow the system by means of **revolutionary** violence. Those in power will answer by **repressive** violence. If they succeed to subdue the rebellion, the subjects may fall into a mood of rage and desperation which in turn may lead to **destructive** violence.



This spiral of violence can only be stopped if the roots of the conflict, namely the imbalances and injustices in society, are redressed. To avoid this rather painful step, the powerful and privileged tend to appeal to Scripture and maintain that subjects must submit to the authority God has placed above them. Romans 13:1-7 is one of the most frequently used texts in this regard. An abuse of Scripture to legitimise unjust rule does not heal the festering wound, however, but covers it up. Thus the spiral of violence cannot be overcome.

The following theses question the right of oppressive rulers to appeal to Romans 13. The theses do not advocate violence, but try to help overcome the roots of violence.

WHAT IS THE DIVINE PURPOSE OF SECULAR AUTHORITY?

1. In antiquity social power structures were perceived in terms of transsubjective spiritual entities which were represented by political rulers. The king is the 'son of God'. In Psalm 2 we have a Hebrew version of this ancient belief.
2. In Psalm 82 these powers are seen to be gods who have been installed by Yahweh as his representative over the different nations. They have to give account to Yahweh concerning their rule. They are judged, demoted and executed if they do not see to it that justice is done in their sphere of responsibility.
3. In Ephesians the 'principalities and powers' are seen to have been placed under the dominion of the risen Christ (1:22ff). Through the witness of the church they are to be informed of the intention of God to restructure the entire universe under the Lordship of Christ (3:10). This witness is a hard spiritual battle (6:10-17). Though Ephesians is later than Romans, it places the latter into an overall context (cf also 1 Cor 15:23-27).
4. In Romans 13 it is stated clearly that these authorities have been instituted by God for a purpose, namely to further the good and to combat evil in social terms. This purpose is in line with the overall intention of God to redeem his world in Christ. Believers are involved in this redemptive action of God - which is the theme of the whole of chapters 12 and 13. Part of God's redemptive action is to further the good and to curtail evil in society by means of authorities. Part of being tuned in with the intention of God is to respect the authorities as instruments of God for this purpose.

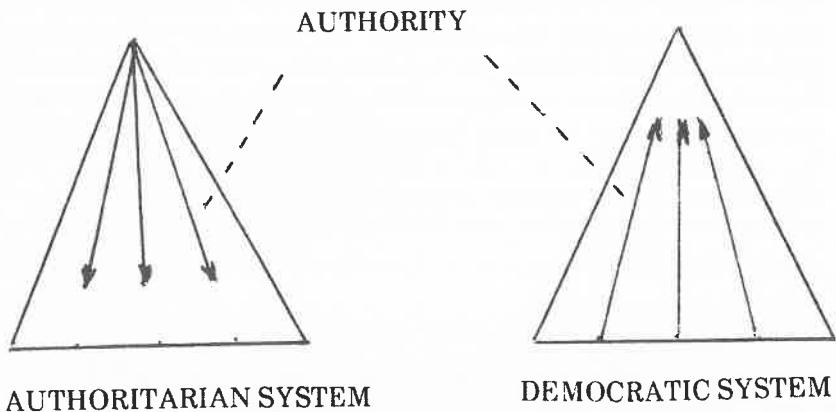
WHAT ROMANS 13 DOES NOT SAY

5. Romans 13 contains no indication about the status of these authorities should they fail to fulfil their divine purpose, nor about the required stance of believers in such an eventuality.

6. Romans 13 obviously presupposes the existing authoritarian state of its time. However, it does not say that this sort of state is immutable or eternal. It also does not reflect on the question whether this form of the state is the most appropriate for its purpose. There was no reason to reflect on these issues when the letter was written. They have since become very important.

DEMOCRACY FULFILS THE DIVINE PURPOSE BETTER

7. In an authoritarian state authority is structured from the top downwards. Sovereignty rests in the rulers. In a democratic state authority is structured from the bottom upwards. Sovereignty lies with the ruled. Rulers are appointed by the ruled, they are accountable to the ruled and they are subject to dismissal by the ruled. Rulers who do not subject themselves to the scrutiny of the ruled are considered to be illegitimate.



8. The authoritarian presupposition has made way for the democratic presupposition in the collective legal perception of humankind on a world wide basis - even where true democracy has not been achieved. This development cannot be reversed.

9. Christians have no reason for wanting to reverse it either. In the authoritarian state only the sin of the ruled is checked by the rulers; the sin of the rulers cannot be checked. In the democratic state the rulers check the sin of the ruled, but the ruled also check the sin of the ruler. Thus the democratic system is better able to fulfil the divine purpose of the state as defined by Psalm 82 and Romans 13 than the authoritarian state.

ROMANS 13 APPLIES TO THE RULERS AS WELL

10. Even under a feudal-patriarchal system the authority of the state must be legitimate. Usurped authority is tyranny and this should, according to an old Christian ethical tradition, be resisted. According to Old Testament tradition unjust rule is condemned by God and calls for the prophetic ministry over against the state. Resistance against tyranny and prophecy against unjust rulers are both in line with the definition of the purpose of the state according to Romans 13, although the latter text does not spell out these consequences or even foresee these eventualities.

11. Under democratic presuppositions Romans 13 implies that rulers should subject themselves to the authority which God has placed over them with the purpose of keeping lawlessness in check. This authority is the scrutiny of the ruled. Rulers who do not subject themselves to this scrutiny become guilty of insurrection against the legitimate authority, while their own rule is illegitimate. Thus they become guilty in terms of Romans 13.

12. The democratic system provides that such rulers can be removed from office through the ballot, not the bullet. It should be pointed out at this stage that our reflections presuppose the genuine concept of democracy, and not its ideological aberration. Genuine democracy has institutionalised peaceful revolution and thus minimises the harm done. Under a democratic system violence is unnecessary and unjustified.

13. According to Romans 13 the 'sword' (that means the legitimate use of force to keep evil in check) is given to the authority for a purpose. Under democratic presuppositions the sword ultimately belongs to the ruled, and is only entrusted to the rulers to be used on their behalf. If the rulers become guilty and do not subject themselves to the scrutiny of the ruled, they forfeit the right to use the sword and this right returns to the primary authority. Then they, not the existing rulers, are entitled to use force to curtail evil - even the evil committed by the rulers.

IS EVERY REVOLUTION LEGITIMATE?

14. Under democratic presuppositions Romans 13 thus implies the legitimacy of the use of force by the ruled against the rulers, if the latter act unjustly and do not subject themselves to the electorate. To use the words of the text: If they do not wish to fear the sword, they should refrain from evil and do good, because the sword is not given to the legitimate authority in vain.

15. Although a revolution may be legitimate in principle under the circumstances mentioned above, the justice of the cause is not the only consideration. The old Christian tradition of the 'just war' adds the following further criteria to the basic requirement of a just cause which we discussed above:

a) Just end. A revolution is only legitimate if it aims at the institution of a full democracy. That means that what it strives for

may give no just reason for another party to resort to violent revolution after the goal has been achieved.

b) **Just means.** The means must reflect the ends. Totalitarian methods used by the revolutionaries, for instance the torture or liquidation of non-conformists, question the legitimacy of the revolution.

c) **Proportionality.** If the harm done outweighs the good which is achieved, the struggle is not legitimate.

d) **Legitimate authority.** A revolution can only be legitimate if it is conducted by legitimated representatives of the populace. This is difficult to establish during a revolutionary struggle, but the demand cannot be waived. Revolutionaries must act on the strength of a mandate, not in their private capacity.

e) **Success must be likely,** both concerning the overthrow of the illegitimate authority and concerning the institution of a legitimate authority.

f) **Because any war, including a revolutionary struggle, inevitably causes loss of life, destruction, hardship, traumatised social relationships, etc., it can only be legitimate as a last resort.**

16. All this implies that revolutionary leaders have to be subjected to the same scrutiny, prophetic ministry and resistance to tyranny which applies to entrenched regimes. If at all, the sword has been entrusted to them for a purpose, and may not be abused for non-democratic purposes. If revolutionaries turn into tyrants the situation may deteriorate into a war of all against all, that is, into social chaos. (Cf Uganda, Lebanon, Chad, etc.)

17. When during a revolutionary struggle the existing regime transforms itself into a democratic institution, its legitimacy may begin to outweigh that of the revolutionary leadership and then its own use of force against the latter is legitimate (cf Philippines). This is by far the better alternative, and Christians should always try to

convince authorities to remove the causes of a revolutionary struggle, thus rendering it unnecessary and unjustified.

18. The above argument changes fundamentally if Marxian presuppositions are used. Seen from the vantage point of a liberal democracy, the Marxian concept of 'democracy', which implies the so-called 'dictatorship of the proletariat', is an ideological ploy to legitimise the totalitarian rule of a small party elite over the rest of the population .