

# The Church, the State and the Christian

By Robin Boisvert

Rachmiel Frydland had become a believer in Jesus a few years before the beginning of World War II. For a young Polish Jew who had even studied to be a rabbi, this was a remarkable occurrence. Of course, there had been many significant events leading up to his conversion. Interactions with sincere Gentile Christians, especially those of the German Baptist Church in Warsaw, had helped persuade him of the truth of Christianity. The joy and fulfillment of his newfound faith revolutionized his life.

But with the outbreak of the war, everything changed. It had taken little time for the armored “blitzkrieg” of Nazi Germany to overrun Poland. What followed was a long and cruel occupation for the Polish people. But for those who were Jews, the coming horrors could hardly have been imagined. Not only was it now a crime to be a Jew, but the Nazis had made it a capital offense for anyone even to offer food or shelter to a Jew. For six years Frydland’s life became like that of a hunted animal. Amazingly, he managed to survive while all the Jews from his district, including his parents, sister and wife were exterminated. Reading his life’s story<sup>1</sup> is a testimony to God’s providential grace and His ability to enable a man to overcome bitterness and resentment.

While the war was still raging, Frydland managed to get back to Warsaw and visit his pastor at the German Baptist Church. “He gave me food and then informed me that I was no longer a member of his church, as they had decided to transfer all the Jewish members to the Polish Church.”<sup>2</sup> This had been done, Frydland was told, in order to comply with the governing authorities. He was then instructed to leave and sternly forbidden ever to return.

With the end of war came an opportunity for reflection. In evaluating his experience, Frydland observed that Christians had been ill taught concerning their obligations to the state. He generously allows, “The pastor and members of the German Baptist Church were probably born-again Christians. However, their government made these laws and therefore, they reasoned, they must obey them. When they were ordered to expel all Hebrew-Christian members, they obeyed, thinking that they were fulfilling the Scriptures.... This was not only true of the German Christians. I can still see in my mind the puzzled face of the deacon of the Polish Evangelical Christian Church as he said, ‘You come to me to help you, to give you food or shelter, but I will be transgressing the laws of my country which I am commanded in the Word of God

to obey.’ Upon this, he showed me the Scripture from ... Romans 13.1-7.”<sup>3</sup>

Before we too quickly condemn such men, we ought to recognize the extremely trying circumstances they lived under. Frydland’s words are humble and sobering, “Only by the grace of God was I born a Jew, to be persecuted and not to have had the opportunity to persecute others. Who can know the heart of man, even my own heart? He that stands let him watch lest he falls. I have not written this to condemn but to warn others as well as myself.”<sup>4</sup>

And his warning is not only to keep watch over our hearts. It is also a warning that we carefully consider the proper relationship of the church to the state. The sad performance of many evangelical Christians in Europe during World War II provides a vivid example of why this question is so important. It is not too much to say that in the history of western civilization there has not been a more crucial issue than the relationship of church to state.

By “state,” I am referring to the governing authorities, whether president or policeman, judge or legislator. It is the state that wields political power, sometimes referred to as “the power of the sword.”

The state may appear in different forms. From the time that He ordained the sun to rule the day and the moon to rule the night (Genesis 1.16) God has delegated authority to what He has created.<sup>5</sup> He remains sovereign, ruling over all, but at different points in human history He has delegated governmental responsibility to the heads of families (patriarchs like Abraham), to judges, kings, assemblies, etc. “They were created for specific and limited purposes by the Sovereign God. As long as they conform to those purposes, they are gifts and to be honored ... They are useful servants.”<sup>6</sup> But there are times when the state defies God. The church leaders Frydland encountered appealed to Romans 13.1-7 as the basis for obeying the Nazis. Where did these leaders go wrong? To answer this question, let’s look at some of the statements of Jesus and Paul.

## Render to Caesar

Jesus’ perspective on the state might be summed up by his famous words, “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s and to God those things which are God’s.”<sup>7</sup> The Christian must render to the state what is needed for its existence, but he may not give the state anything that belongs to God- worship, for instance. There came a time in the early history of the church when the

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> David Hall, Savior or Servant, Kuyper Institute, Oak Ridge, TN, 1996, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 12.17

<sup>1</sup> Rachmiel Frydland, Joy Cometh in the Morning, Kehilat Mashiach, P.O. 37062, Cincinnati, OH 45222.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 38.

Roman emperor demanded worship from all, including Christians. Many refused at the cost of their lives. Jesus, too, would have resisted this, just as He did Satan's temptation to bow down to him in the wilderness.<sup>8</sup> Such resistance is also consistent with the examples of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.<sup>9</sup> In other words, totalitarianism is a positive evil. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century has witnessed examples of this on the political right (Nazism in Germany) and the left (Communism in the former Soviet Union). Whenever the state or its representative demands what is God's, it ought to be resisted. Jesus doesn't give a detailed definition of what rightfully belongs to the state, but Mark 12.13-17 indicates that money (taxes) at least is involved. Tax revolts are clearly wrong. (There is nothing wrong with working through the valid processes of government to lower taxes, however.)

When governing authorities demand that Christians disobey God in order to obey them, they have gone too far and must be resisted. What form may this resistance take? Jesus specifically refrained from the use of force when it was in His power to use it at the critical point of His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. "Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide me with more than twelve legions of angels?"<sup>10</sup> Later He said to Pilate, "If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, ..." <sup>11</sup> If Jesus had wanted to support armed resistance against the Roman overlords, He could have given some indication that He agreed with the Zealots, a Jewish political party, dedicated to the overthrow of Rome by any means. There is no evidence that He ever did so.

In Acts 4.18, when the apostles were commanded not to preach Christ, they resisted. But their focus was on obedience to God, not animosity toward authority. It could be said that they disobeyed submissively, with hands open and outstretched toward God in prayer, not with fists clenched in defiance of government.

### Paul and the State

Throughout Jesus' ministry, there is no indication that He was anything but a "good citizen" of the Empire. And when we come to Paul the evidence is similar. He held Roman citizenship and even appealed to it when it would be in the best interests of the church. He made no attempt to escape when he had the chance to do so (on more than one occasion). He used his opportunities before governmental leaders, whether Jewish or Roman, to witness to the kingdom of God and win the souls of men. When

unjustly accused by the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem, he used his right as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar.

Do such facts point to a servile Paul, who would encourage unqualified submission to rulers and authorities? This is what some have thought based on a surface reading of Romans 13.1-7. This is certainly what collaborationist theologians and pastors taught and urged during the dark days of World War II.

### Different Roles

Romans 13.1-7 is the most significant passage in the New Testament on civil government. Just before this passage, in Chapter 12, believers are urged to live lives of love toward other Christians *and* toward those outside the church, even enemies who cause harm. In such situations the Christian is expected to shun vengeance and return kindness for evil. "*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*" (Romans 12.21). Note the contrast between this and Romans 13.4 "*He [the governing authority] is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.*"

Paul wanted the Christians at Rome to understand that the state may have the same discernment of good and evil as the church, but their ways of responding to it are totally different. The church is mainly concerned with mercy. Her role is to act as God's ambassador of reconciliation through the gospel, to overcome evil with good. But the state is mainly concerned with justice and the punishment of wrongdoers. The church needs to see such activity as the state's legitimate function. So church and state have different roles.

### A Brief Analysis of Romans 13.1-7

Verse 1 - *Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.*

Verse 2 - *Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.*

Each person is to be subject to the governing authorities as they act within their proper jurisdiction. The reason given is that civil authority owes its existence to God, having been ordained by His providence. Because of this, opposing the authority is tantamount to opposing God, and those who do so actively bring judgment on themselves.

It is well to stop here and remind ourselves that Paul would have been familiar with the Scriptural accounts noted above in Daniel and would not sanction unqualified

<sup>8</sup> Luke 4.7 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel 3.6.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 26.53

<sup>11</sup> John 16.36

obedience. He is simply not here dealing with every situation. If he was facing a predicament similar to Daniel, we can safely assume Paul would have disobeyed- but in a submissive manner. Paul is not giving us a complete treatise on the respective rights of church and state. This sort of failure to compare Scripture with Scripture has been the cause of many errors. If the leaders Frydland encountered had realized this, his story would have been quite different.

Verse 3 - *For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you.*

“Paul refutes the exclusively negative attitude toward civil authorities as if they were always intent on doing evil, and as if one should be afraid of them.”<sup>12</sup> In many societies there is often a negative attitude towards authority. This should not be the case for the Christian.

Verse 4 - *For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.*

Here, the reason Paul gives for obedience is that the authority is actually God's servant, but in quite a different way than we are normally accustomed to think of God's servants. He is an agent of God's wrath bringing retributive judgment on evildoers. To fulfill this service/ministry, he is given a sword which is more than a symbol of authority. The state has coercive power and the authority to use it.

The wrongdoer is told to fear. Such fear is intended to restrain evil. And this leads us to the key blessing for the church in civil authority. It is an important aspect of God's common grace. To the extent that civil government restrains evil, it serves God's purpose and aids the progress of the gospel.

Verse 5 - *Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.*

Here, Paul adds to the motive for obedience. Not only is the fear of punishment to influence our willing subjection to civil authority in its proper sphere, but our conscience before God is also given as a reason. This tells us that our attitude toward civil government has an effect on our relationship to God!

Verse 6 - *This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.*

Verse 7 - *Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.*

Paying taxes has biblical warrant. Not to do so is to go against conscience, the nearest antecedent to “this” in verse 6. In verse 7, Paul generalizes to include other obligations different from money. Adopting an adversarial posture toward civil authorities is likely to make matters worse. Anyone who has tried to argue about a traffic violation would agree with this. A respectful, cooperative attitude, even in the face of an officious expression of authority, usually produces positive results. But whether or not this happens, Paul tells us we *owe* this to authorities.

### **The Temporal and the Eternal**

The state is God's servant and is willed by God, but it is not of the same divine nature as the church. It is a temporal, not an eternal institution, supremely concerned with *this* world. Its interests lie in the here and now, not the hereafter. The church, on the other hand, while certainly concerned with this world, deals also with ultimate issues taking her above and beyond this present world order. She is of an *eternal* order. Both church and state have been ordained by God. Both act as his servants in their proper spheres. But a time will come when the state will no longer be necessary.

The Christian's basic stance should be one of submission to the state in its proper sphere. Ideally, the church and the state ought to have the same understanding of good and evil, but they will have different ways of dealing with it. Each is appropriate in its God-given sphere.<sup>13</sup> The church is God's agent of mercy, every Christian an ambassador declaring the reconciling work of Jesus Christ. The state is His agent of wrath, who does not bear the sword in vain. The state performs its most important function when it punishes evildoers. In this it acts to restrain the innate evil in man and preserve order in society. This is an expression of God's common grace.

But the state is incompetent to deal in matters of faith and is out of its element when it attempts to dictate to the church how she ought minister the grace of God. It would not have been easy for Rachmiel Frydland's pastor to face down the Nazis over this issue. But it would have been the right thing to do.

<sup>12</sup> William Hendriksen, New Testament Commentary- Romans, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1981, p. 434.

<sup>13</sup> Oscar Cullmann, The State in the New Testament, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1956, pps. 50-70.