

The Christian's Political Responsibility (or the Christian attitude to the state)

by Mnyama Sizwe*

In view of the present conflict between Church and state and the allegations made by certain politicians that certain church leaders have overstepped their limits it has become necessary to examine the New Testament material that has a bearing on the political responsibility of the christian. The passage that is most commonly abused by the government and its supporters is Romans 13:1-7.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement

For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval,

for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer.

Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.

For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.

Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

We shall examine this passage sentence by sentence: "*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities*": "*Governing authorities*" are governments, civil authorities (the state). *hyperechusais* (supreme) means the higher grades of authority. (cf. 1 Tim. 2:2 en hyperochē ontes = "those in authority").

hypotassesthō = The verb *hypotassesthai* (used also in v. 5) is a key word in this section. It is usually assumed that this word means "to obey", and it is in this sense that the government and its supporters use it. In the New Testament it occurs thirty times and in the majority of cases obedience is not the predominant idea. In 1 Cor. 16:16 it is used to indicate the proper attitude of a christian to the leaders of the church. But in Eph. 5:21, it is used to show a *reciprocal* obligation: *hypotassomer allēlois en phobō Christou*. Significantly Calvin's Comment on Eph. 5:21 reads:

"God has so bound us to each other, that no man ought to avoid subjection. And where

* Mnyama Sizwe is a prominent Methodist Theologian.

love reigns, there is a mutual servitude. I do not except even Kings and governors, for they rule that they may serve. Therefore, it is very right that he should exhort all to be subject to each other."¹

In a democracy there are areas of life where the rulers subject themselves to the will of the people. C.E.B. Cranfield puts it this way:

"... a King, if he be a christian, ought to regard his meanest subject as superior to himself in the sense of having a greater claim on him than he has on himself, since his meanest subject is Christ's representative to him."²

Even if we restrict the meaning of the word *hypotasesthai* to mean that the subject must obey the rulers, it still does not mean unconditional obedience to the rulers. A responsible christian will obey the rulers so far as such obedience does not conflict with God's laws. When it does conflict with God's laws he will seriously and responsibly disobey the laws of the state. Like Peter and the apostles he will say: "We must obey God rather than men". Therefore, Tutu, Boesak, Chikane and a host of lesser luminaries are right when they tell this government: "We must obey God rather than men". Moreover, the christian has a duty to see to it that the state rules justly; and that every citizen has a responsible share in governing, that is, in voting responsibly in parliamentary elections. In order to use his vote responsibly the christian will make himself informed about government policies and political issues. Thus he will be able to support just policies and oppose unjust ones.

"For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God."

When Paul wrote these words the Emperor, Nero, was ruling well, with the help of his Provincial governors, magistrates and the army. He had not yet begun to persecute christians. At that time the government benefited the church. There was peace throughout the empire and christian workers, like any other people within the empire, had the protection of the government. Christians admit that government is an order of creation instituted by God for the orderly running of human society.

Paul here was writing from the background of the Jewish theocracy where the king (Saul, David, Solomon, etc) was appointed by God and anointed by God's prophet. This includes even pagan kings like Cyrus who is called God's "anointed" and is addressed by God as "my shepherd."³ Paul and the christians of his day had to deal with a pagan government but they still had to acknowledge it as divinely appointed. God who is Lord of human history is Lord and ruler of all nations. Therefore, the authorities that do exist have been sanctioned by him for his own purpose. This does not mean, however, that God underwrites all that governments do. Certainly the acts of Hitler, and Amin and the apostles of apartheid cannot claim God's sanction.

A point which is often over-looked by the advocates of unquestioning obedience to the state is that being "instituted by God" puts a heavy responsibility on the shoulders of rulers. They are accountable to God for the trust which he has committed to them. When they abuse this trust it is the duty of God's prophet to tell them so, and to point out to them the limits of their authority.

1. *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, tr. by T.H.L. Parker, Edinburgh, 1965, p.204.
 2. *C.E.B. Cranfield: The Service of God*, London, (1965) p. 662.
 3. Isaiah 44:28; 45:1.

"The state exists for the sake of men, women and children, not they for the sake of the state." The state exists to serve the best interests and welfare of its people, especially the underprivileged and the disadvantaged.

"... he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed."

This does not mean that to resist the government is necessarily to resist God himself. It has been stated above that in certain circumstances obedience to God implies disobedience to the laws of the land. According to J.A.T. Robinson: "It is just when the state becomes identified with the demonic forces that it is *not* to be obeyed."⁴ Such disobedience may sometimes mean active resistance to the state.

When a government is guilty of tyranny, when it denies human rights to some of its people, and when it commands what is forbidden by God, or forbids what God commands, then christians may disobey or resist such a government knowing fully well what the consequences may be since governments have the power of life and death over their subjects.

"For rulers are not a terror to good conduct ... For he is God's servant for your good ... to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer."

The assumption here is that governments always support good conduct and punish the wrongdoer. No account is taken of the possibility that the government may be so unjust as to punish good conduct and support the wrongdoer. There are instances in South Africa at the present time where the peace-makers are in detention and the killers go free. It is worth remembering that both Paul and Peter were eventu-

ally condemned and put to death by the Roman government for doing good.

"For the same reason you also pay taxes ... Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due."

Because christians know the place of governments in the divine purpose they pay taxes. They know also that they are under obligation to pay taxes to the state in return for the protection and other amenities which the state provides. No state can function without financial support from its citizens. But, as Calvin puts it, governments ought to behave in a way worth of God's "officials" and "to remember that all that they receive from the people is public property, and not a means of satisfying private lust and luxury."⁵ A citizen may, in certain circumstances refuse to pay a particular tax.

That christians should pay taxes goes back to traditions about Jesus. One such tradition is recorded in Matthew 17:24-27 who alone records the incident when the collectors of the half-shekel tax went to Jesus' home in Capernaum and found Peter alone. They asked Peter if Jesus did pay the tax. Peter's reply was that Jesus did, in fact, pay the tax. And when Jesus came home he initiated the following conversation with Peter:

"Simon, what is your opinion? Who pays duties or taxes to the kings of this world? The citizens of the country of the foreigners?"

"The foreigners," answered Peter.

"Well, then," replied Jesus, "that means that the citizens don't have to pay. But we don't want to offend these people. So go the lake and drop in a line. Pull up the first fish

4. J.A.T. Robinson: *Wrestling with Romans*, London, 1979, p.139.

5. Calvin: *op. cit.* p.284.

you hook, and in its mouth you will find a coin worth enough for my temple-tax and yours. Take it and pay them our taxes.”

So as a citizen Jesus paid the tax and encouraged his followers to do the same, Christians today have an obligation to pay tax. But they also have an obligation to see to it that benefits accruing from the payment of tax are justly distributed to all citizens who pay tax.

In South Africa all citizens are taxed on the same basis since 1984, but do not derive the same benefits from the paying of tax.

For example, payment of pensions is based on racially differentiated scales with Africans receiving the lowest benefits. Social services, such as roads, sanitation, water, lighting etc, are the poorest for Africans. Moreover, Africans are taxed, without representation in the central parliament which makes the executes laws for everybody. William Pitt told the British Parliament that “taxation without representation is tyranny.”⁶

Paul must have known from tradition the incident concerning the payment of taxes to Caesar which is reported by all the Synoptic Gospels: (Matthew 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20-26): Clearly this was a burning issue at the time. Many Jews had refused to recognize the legitimacy of the authority of a foreign ruler over them, and therefore refused to pay taxes to the Roman Government. Whether he answered the question positively or negatively he was sure to fall foul of either the Jewish masses or the Roman authorities. As is well-known the reply of Jesus to their tricky question was:

This saying is often misinterpreted to mean that secular and spiritual mat-

ters should be kept apart. This was certainly not the aim of Jesus who knew the Jewish theocratic background, where there was no distinction between the secular and the spiritual. In his life and teaching Jesus never made this separation. What the saying meant was that the Jews should pay their taxes to Caesar who was responsible for their welfare as citizens and give their ultimate loyalty to God who is responsible for the whole of their lives. The worship which some gave to Caesar in Emperor Worship rightly belongs to God who alone is our object of worship. Noteworthy also is the observation of Tertullian that even Caesar is made in the image of God.

Christians do not deny that they have a duty to respect and honour their rulers. Thoughts similar to Romans 13:1-7 are found also in I Peter 2:13-17; and Titus 3:1-2

In I Timothy 2:1-2 Christians are urged to *pray* “for kings and all who are in high positions.” Christians have done this from the early days of the church in spite of virulent persecutions by the Roman government. As early as 197 A.D. Tertullian wrote:

“We Christians are always interceding for all the Emperors. We pray for them long life, a secure rule, a safe home, brave armies, a faithful senate an honest people, a quiet world – and everything for which a man and an Emperor can pray.”⁷

Unlike the Romans passage which has been subjected to a variety of interpretations, Revelation 13, has generally been accepted as a condemnation of the state. Nevertheless all political power is the gift of God. Here the Roman state has over-reached itself. By demanding Emperor Worship it abrogates to itself that which

6. Quoted in C. de K. Fowler and G.J.J. Smit: *New History for Senior Certificate and Matriculation*, Cape Town, n.d., p.6

7. Quoted from R. Owen: *A Guide to Romans*, London, 1975, p.170.

by right belongs to God. Therefore, it is called "The Beast". It has ceased to be human and has become bestial.

To conclude then Christians accept that the state is part of God's arrangement for the well-being of human society. But not all government laws and policies are in line with the christian ethic. When such laws and policies conflict with the christian conscience the christian has a duty to resist. As

Martin Luther King once wrote: "To disobey such a law is to show the highest respect for law."⁸ Therefore, civil disobedience to unjust laws may be a christian duty.

During the American War of Independence an American wrote: "Rulers are bound to rule in the fear of God and for the good of the people; and if they do not, then in resisting them we are doing God service."⁹