

## Whose Side Are You On?

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Based upon Daniel 6:1-28 and Romans 13:1-7

How do you handle conflict? Today I'm not talking about silly disagreements over trivial things like how to stack the dishwasher or hang a toilet paper roll, or even more serious and often emotionally devastating conflicts that arise at times between parents and their teenage children, or between spouses or friends. I'm talking about conflict with Authorities with a capital A. According to experts on generational differences,<sup>1</sup> with every generation Americans have grown less and less comfortable with and respectful of authority. People in the Traditional generation, were raised to defer to authority at all levels—home, classroom, workplace, government. But Baby Boomers challenged those expectations a bit, and then Generation X'ers a lot more. By the time you get down to the Millennial generation, there are no implicit assumptions among them that one must respect or obey classic institutional authorities. These are broad over-generalizations of course, but if they are true even to a degree, then I would guess, given the demographics of this congregation, that today's texts may be very challenging for many people here because they are not only about how we deal with conflicts with authorities, the texts also raise conflicts of authority themselves. But it is for that very reason that I want us to consider them today because I set out this summer to do a series on biblical texts we all should know, and I can't do that without addressing what the Bible has to teach us about who or what is most authoritative for Christians, and how we are called to respond when conflicts arise.

Both the Old and New Testament texts today address directly the situation of how a person of faith should view and respond to government authority. In the case of the famous story of Daniel and the lions' den, the main character, Daniel, who is a Jew enslaved in Babylon during the exile, is faced with a dilemma. He had worked within the system of his oppressors so well, that even though he wasn't Babylonian, he had become in effect, King Darius' right-hand man. But the remaining satraps and government officials on Daniel's level had become so jealous of him that they had persuaded Darius to pass a law saying that anyone who worshiped anyone or thing other than the King would be thrown to the lions. This presented Daniel with a choice. He could stay working within the system where he was secure and thriving, but forego practicing his faith, or he could knowingly endanger his life by continuing to keep his covenant with God and following God's ways. Daniel chose the latter route, the brave martyr's route, and according to the story, he was rewarded for doing so. Although he was thrown into the lions' den, he was not eaten. God was with him and kept him safe. Thus the text teaches that when we are faced with a conflict between the ways of God and the ways of an oppressive or evil government, people of faith should choose the ways of God, even if doing so endangers our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Shaw, Haydn, Sticking Points: How to Get 4 Generations Working Together in the 12 Places They Come Apart (Carol Stream, Tyndale House Pub., Inc., 2013).

This is the message of the whole *Book of Daniel* really. As I have explained before, *Daniel* was not written during the 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E. Babylonian exile. It was written centuries later, during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E., when a Greek king of the Seleucid Empire, named Antiochus Epiphanes IV, was ruler over Israel. Antiochus persecuted the Jews without any of the qualms Darius was said to have. He had Jews killed for any number of reasons: for worshiping in the Temple, reading or teaching Scripture, circumcising their sons, etc. He was evil incarnate for the Jews during that time period. So the *Book of Daniel* was written to encourage the Jews to remain true to Yahweh no matter what. It is apocalyptic literature, which means it is a text purportedly about one subject, which speaks to another subject using coded language that only people in the know would recognize, in order to keep them safe from persecution. “God will win in the end,” the whole book, as well as today’s story proclaims. “So stay true to God and resist the authorities if they do anything that would interfere with your faith practices.”

That seems like a clear enough message, and one that we could still apply to our lives today, until we jump ahead to today’s New Testament text. Writing in the late 50s C.E., about a hundred years after *Daniel* was written, the apostle Paul told the Christians in Rome: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God... for rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.” Had Paul forgotten the Jews’ history with abusive authorities, or Jesus’ history for that matter? These verses seem to conflict with *Daniel* in that they appear to link faithful obedience to the government with faithful obedience to God. If the Bible is, as we affirm in our Reformed Tradition, “the unique and authoritative witness of God,” then what’s a person of faith to do? Should we reject the government because of our faith or be subject to it because of our faith?

Before we can answer this question, we need to recognize that there is still another conflict raised by these texts that has less to do with how they relate to each other and more to do with how they relate to us. Both texts conflict with our 21<sup>st</sup> understanding of reality. We know that thousands of Christians were martyred by lions, leopards, and all kinds of wild beasts for Roman amusement, ironically not long after Paul wrote his letter to the Roman Christians. God did not save these faithful people from being eaten alive, nor did God save Paul from being martyred by the very authorities he praised not long after he wrote the letter. We also know that over the last two thousand years the number of people who have died under totalitarian regimes has only grown. After the Holocaust, who can believe that rulers are never “a terror to good conduct only bad”? If anyone today suggested that Hitler was acting as an instrument of God, we would find that offensive in the extreme. So what do we do? Daniel’s lesson does not seem to be true, and as Bible scholar John O’Neill put it, and Paul’s instructions, “have caused more unhappiness and misery in the Christian East and West than any other seven verses in the New Testament by the license they have given to tyrants, and the support for tyrants the Church has felt called on to offer as a result of the presence of *Romans* 13 in the canon.”<sup>2</sup> To resolve our conflicts do we have to pick between two positions we don’t believe, or reject both texts as authoritative for us today? And if we do the latter, can we still say with integrity that the Bible is our highest authority next to God?

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Horrell, David G., “*The Peaceable, Tolerant Community and the Legitimate Role of the State: Ethics and Ethical Dilemmas in Romans 12:1-15:13*,” in REVIEW AND EXPOSITOR, 100, Winter 2003, at 85.

The Lectionary dodges the problem altogether by leaving both of today's texts out of its three-year line up of texts for preaching and reflection. I guess the scholars who put it together were conflict-adverse themselves. But I don't think pretending that the texts are not in the Bible is the answer. If we do that how can we say that other texts in the Bible are critical for faithful living? No, rather than skip the texts, we would do far better to learn from history as well as Presbyterian hermeneutics, how to be more thoughtful in how we see and respond to all authorities other than God.

As I said, we know that *Daniel* was written as a didactic apocalyptic fiction. The point of the story is not to teach us that we have nothing to fear from lions, both real and metaphorical; it is to teach us that God is our greatest source of strength and our means of salvation, and therefore must always be our highest authority even if there are lions around us. If we can accomplish good under a bad human authority, remaining faithful to God's ways, then that, at the very least, is what we should do. (*Esther* would say we still should do more, but that's a text for another day). If we feel the authorities are putting us in a position where we have to choose between God's way and theirs, however, then as people of faith, we must choose God's. This is part of being in the world but not of the world, an idea we have been considering from several different directions for the last few weeks. The first Christian martyrs did this, as did Dietrich Bonhoeffer during World War II and Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and others during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Chapter 13 of *Romans* does not really reject this message, but it adds an important corollary to it. This is clear when we consider what Paul wrote in his own historical context. He wasn't writing a treatise on Church and State relationship when he wrote the Roman Christians. He was writing to their particular circumstance, which happened to be kind of precarious. You see, during the late 40s, Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome. Then in the 50s, after Nero succeeded him, two other conflicts dominated the news. One was a tax crisis in Rome. The way that taxes were collected was considered so abusive and unfair that there were uprisings all over Rome, and many others, who did not join the uprisings, protested by refusing to pay their taxes. Meanwhile, over in Palestine, the Jews were beginning to rise up against Roman occupation. Their rebellion would ultimately lead to the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. Into all of this mess Paul stepped, trying to address the Jewish Christians in Rome. He was concerned that they might do several things: 1) refuse to pay taxes on moral grounds and therefore draw attention to themselves that would lead to their expulsion from Rome too; 2) refuse to pay taxes on spiritual grounds, because they, like the Corinthians, mistakenly believed that because they were in Christ they were no longer subject to the authorities; or 3) stir up rebellion in some other way to demonstrate solidarity with the Jews in Palestine, thereby inviting Roman authorities to attack the Christians in Rome.

Paul was a Jew, but he was also a Roman citizen. At the time he wrote the letter, Nero was not yet the evil emperor, nor the persecutor of Christians that he would become. So Paul was hopeful that it would be possible to find a way to keep the Roman Christians safe and faithful in Rome. In the section of his letter on Christian ethics, therefore, he tried to explain to them how to do both. Basically he told them to be good citizens not bad ones, so as not to draw attention to

themselves. “Pay your taxes,” he said. “Remember that even though Christ is Lord, you are still subject to earthly authorities.” But by his word choice, Paul made it clear that they did not have to “obey” those authorities in all cases, nor should they worship them as gods, even though the Romans held themselves out that way. Instead the Roman Christians were to recognize that one of the ways God worked good in the world was through human governments which brought order to society and cared for its citizens. “Faith doesn’t give you the right to be an anarchist,” he effectively told them creating a thematic bridge with his instruction in Chapter 12 not to seek good by seeking vengeance against one’s enemies. “Faith calls on you to be a responsible citizen even while you work to help establish the kingdom of God on earth.”

Although it is easy to see why this text could have been used throughout the centuries to justify tyranny when its words were taken literally and out of context, when you apply our Presbyterian hermeneutic (method of interpreting Scripture), taking into account the historical context, Paul’s pastoral advice to the Romans is not really in conflict with the teachings of *Daniel*, something made all the more clear by the fact that Paul himself was martyred for his faith not terribly long after writing this letter. Like Daniel, Paul’s greatest authority was God. He was just trying to protect the Roman Christians by offering his own version of Jesus’ speech, “Render unto Caesar those things that are Caesar’s and unto God those things that are God’s.” He was trying to help them find the line that Daniel found, which marks when you can work for good within the system, and when you must stand against it.

But what if the texts were clearly in conflict even after historical analysis, then what would we do? We wouldn’t throw them out. Instead our Presbyterian hermeneutic tells us to do two things: first, consider the rest of the Bible, because taking texts out of biblical context as well as historical context is not getting the full picture; and second, resolve any remaining conflict by applying the Rule of Love. Since God is love, when all else fails, we are to do the most loving thing we can do by asking which approach best allows us to love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbors as ourselves. This is a good rule to apply in any situation of conflict, not just when doing Bible study.

When we do this we discover that sometimes the most faithful and loving thing we can do is to resist an oppressive government, and sometimes the most faithful and loving thing we can do is work to strengthen the government to serve God’s way better. We must not turn the government into a false god, as unfortunately many Christians today have, selling out the Gospel in order to hold onto power and prestige for themselves; nor must we reject and demonize the government programs designed for the common good, as many Christians are today, condemning the value of taxes, shared health care, environmental regulations, and more, in favor of worshiping the cult of individualism. Instead, Christ calls us to work to care for our neighbors in a way that is consistent with God’s will within and outside of the government as the circumstances require.

This is what the Office of Public Witness in Washington D.C. does. It articulates for the legislature our biblical understandings of what God calls us to do to care for Creation and all who live in it, and also equips people of faith to challenge and protest the government when it is acting

as the oppressor. I encourage you to make checking its website regularly<sup>3</sup> a part of your spiritual devotions because you will see then on individual issues—immigration, health care, gun control, etc.,—how our denomination understands the Rule of Love in action. This fall there is going to be a training program for all who want to respond to the government’s proposed budget to make sure it does not abandon the needs of the least for the needs of the wealthiest.

Like the Jews of ancient Israel and the Christians living in the first century, we live in interesting and troubling times. The potential for good is tremendous; the potential for harm is equally great. As you strive to maneuver your way faithfully through the day to day challenges of today’s political and highly partisan world, strive to make sure that your greatest loyalty is to Christ. Whether that loyalty causes conflict or relieves it, we know it is the way of God and the way of love, and with God’s help, the way we will all together find our way into God’s future with hope. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/compassion-peace.../washington>