

# **The peaceable, tolerant community and the legitimate role of the State: ethics and ethical dilemmas in Romans 12.1–15.13\***

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## *Abstract*

These four chapters of Romans constitute a coherent section of ethical instruction which aims to foster the solidarity of the Christian community, to legitimate a degree of diversity in its convictions and practices, and also to advise Christians on relations with outsiders, specifically with the state. The community so envisioned, which unites Jew and Gentile without erasing their differences, is an embodiment of the gospel presented throughout Romans. Particular attention is given to the notorious Rom 13.1-7 and to the place of this text in its literary context. While the Christian community is presented as a non-conformist, non-violent community (Rom 12.2, 17-21), the text also sanctions the use of force on the part of the state (Rom 13.4). Thus it raises difficult questions concerning the ways in contemporary readers, whose membership of the Christian church does not preclude participation as citizens of their societies, should discern their responsibilities.

## ***Introduction***

It is widely recognised and frequently stated that Romans 12.1 marks the point at which Paul begins to draw out the ethical consequences that follow from the theological exposition of the gospel that has taken up the first eleven chapters of the letter to the Romans. Romans provides the clearest example in the Pauline corpus of the ‘pattern’ of theology followed by ethics, the latter grounded in the former.<sup>1</sup> What is less immediately clear is precisely how these chapters of moral instruction relate to the preceding exposition; whether they are general paraenesis or specifically related to the situation of the Roman Christians; and whether they have any clear internal logic and structure — or whether, as Karl Barth suggests, ‘there is on the whole no proper sequence of thought and therefore no particular arrangement’.<sup>2</sup> If Barth is right on this

last point, then it follows, as Barth goes on to say, that ‘[w]e should therefore not expect to find anything like a systematic exposition, a kind of Christian ethics – not even in outline’.<sup>3</sup>

We may immediately grant the point that these chapters are not a systematic exposition of Christian ethics. Recent work on Romans has stressed the various factors both in Paul’s life and in the churches at Rome that influence the shape and content of this letter, and has thus illuminated the inadequacy of viewing it as a systematic compendium of Pauline theology (or ethics).<sup>4</sup> However, we should perhaps not so quickly abandon the expectation that these chapters may convey some of the key themes and convictions of Pauline ethics, and may be more coherent than Barth perceives. For all its situational specificity — and that is not to be downplayed — Romans remains ‘the most sustained and reflective statement of Paul’s own theology by Paul himself’.<sup>5</sup> And while I take the ethics of Romans 12–15 to be orientated specifically to the Roman situation and not as ‘general paraenesis’, as some argue,<sup>6</sup> they are clearly influenced by discussions of ethics in Paul’s previous letters and so may be expected to show a degree of synthesis and maturity less apparent elsewhere.

In a short essay it is impossible to do justice to these chapters, still less to the exegetical and interpretative difficulties that arise from them.<sup>7</sup> My aims in this essay are to present an overview of this section of Romans with a view to highlighting its structure and key themes, and to reflect on the ethical emphases that emerge and their bearing on contemporary ethical discussion. Because of its notorious difficulty, as well as its contemporary significance, a good deal of space is devoted to Rom 13.1–7.

### ***The structure and content of Romans 12.1–15.13***

James Dunn sees this whole section of ethical instruction as coherent and relevant when related to the preceding chapters of Romans,<sup>8</sup> in which ‘Paul’s chief concern

has been to redefine the relation between Jew and Gentile within the saving purpose of the one creator God'.<sup>9</sup> Dunn proposes a broadly chiasmic structure for the section, acknowledging that this structure is however 'rough and unbalanced': the whole of 14.1-15.6 is seen as the balancing section to 12.1-2, with 15.7-13 serving as 'an effective conclusion to the body of the letter as a whole'.<sup>10</sup>

I would agree with Dunn (and others) in identifying 12.1-2 as the opening unit; indeed, it provides a headline statement for all that follows. Similarly, 15.7-13 serves as a fitting conclusion not only (though certainly) to the specific section 14.1-15.6, but also to the whole of the letter to this point: the scriptural quotations are chosen so as to reinforce the message that God's purpose was always to bring Jew and Gentile together in one worshipping community (cf. Rom 1.16, 2.9-11, 3.9, 3.29-30, 9.22-25, 10.12, 11.25-32). I am less convinced, however, that 14.1-15.6 is appropriately seen as a balancing section, in thematic and structural terms, to 12.1-2. While the whole text from 12.1-15.13 is rightly seen as devoted to ethical instruction, 14.1ff. begins a major new section focused on specific issues affecting the internal relations of the Roman churches (though doubtless also relevant to other churches Paul knew).<sup>11</sup> Any chiasm is better seen in relation to the structure of chapters 12-13, as we shall see below.

## Romans 12

The opening two verses of chapter 12 clearly stand as a programmatic statement defining the framework for ethical discussion to follow and setting that discussion firmly with the theological exposition of chapters 1-11: in view of God's mercies (*oiktirmoi*)<sup>12</sup> — precisely the theme on which chapter 11 has reached its climactic end (11.30-32) and which has brought forth Paul's ejaculation of praise (11.33-36) — the *adelphoi* at Rome, along with all who are in Christ in every place, should present their

(death-ridden) bodies (7.24), whose redemption they long for (8.23), as sacrifices to God. In view of all that God has done, as set out in chapters 1-11, this is indeed a ‘rational’ (*logikos*) response.<sup>13</sup> But this presentation of one’s self to God implies a stark transformation, which Paul expresses in both its negative and positive dimensions. The complete orientation of the body towards God means a break with ‘this present age’, an end to being conformed to its patterns of thought and practice. Positively it means a metamorphosis (Paul uses the verb *metamorphoō*), a renewal of the mind, to orient the self towards the will of God.

As the more specific and detailed exhortation begins, in 12.3-21, Paul reiterates themes familiar either from his own instruction elsewhere or from other traditions of early Christian paraenesis. Verses 3-8 repeat, in concise form, the call for the renunciation of self-inflation, familiar from 1 Corinthians (4.6, 4.18-19, 5.2, 8.1, 13.4), and the depiction of the community as a united body in Christ, with diverse members bearing complementary and varied gifts, familiar from 1 Corinthians 12. Verses 9-21, in a series of concise aphorisms, pick up a number of themes known from both Pauline and non-Pauline paraenesis: the call for love (*agapē*, cf. 1 Cor 8.1, 13.1ff, Gal 5.6, 13, 22; John 13.35, 15.9ff., etc.), particularly for one’s sisters and brothers (*philadelphia*, cf. 1 Thess 4.9; Heb 13.1; 1 Pet 1.22; 2 Pet 1.7), and for more specific virtues relevant to cultivating a community characterised by mutual care, generosity and hospitality. While the focus is initially on the character and qualities of relationships between ‘insiders’, members of the Christian congregations, it switches through verses 14-17 to concentrate on relations with those outside.<sup>14</sup> Verse 14 first indicates this external focus, with a possible echo of Matt 5.44//Luke 6.28. Verses 15-16 seem to turn their attention back primarily to relations among members of the community, reiterating the call for mutual care and the rejection of high-mindedness,

but verse 17 shifts once more to the question of external relationships, again with a thematic (though not verbal) parallel in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5.39). The exhortation not to return evil for evil clearly became an established element in early Christian paraenesis: the tradition is reproduced, in similar form, in 1 Thess 5.15 and 1 Pet 3.19, as well as here in Romans.<sup>15</sup> Instead of meeting evil with evil, violence with violence, Christians are to pursue the route of goodness and peace towards ‘all people’ (*pantes anthropoi*) — a phrase emphatically repeated in verses 17 and 18. The closing verses of the chapter deal specifically with the subject of vengeance (cf. Matt 5.38-48). This recourse is forbidden to Christians, who are to leave such matters to God, responding to evil instead with good, a course of action that may lead, in the end, to their enemies’ repentance and reconciliation (this seems the best interpretation of the image of the burning coals.<sup>16</sup> Cf. also 1 Pet 2.12; 3.13-17).

### Romans 13

What follows is, of course, the notorious Rom 13.1-7. The moral problem of this section is most sharply expressed by John O’Neill: ‘These seven verses have caused more unhappiness and misery in the Christian East and West than any other seven verses in the New Testament by the licence 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>17</sup> O’Neill’s answer is to remove the verses from the canon, along with many other sections of Paul’s Roman epistle; others too have reckoned this section an interpolation, or at least an ‘alien body’, an odd intrusion, in Paul’s text.<sup>18</sup>

However, the linguistic connections with their context and the lack of textual evidence for their omission render unlikely the view that these verses are an interpolation,<sup>19</sup> so we must seek to elucidate their meaning in context. One interpretative strategy, adopted not least because of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* O’Neill

rightly deplores, is to insist that Romans 13 does not offer a theology of political power or of the state, but is essentially a contextual response to specific pressures in Rome in the late 50s CE and an attempt to protect Christians (and perhaps Jews too) in the city from unnecessary persecution.<sup>20</sup> This response, which takes many forms, is an understandable attempt at ‘damage limitation’, an effort to restrict any broader theology of the state being drawn from this passage. Nonetheless, there are certain difficulties with such a move. First there is the problem that Paul speaks in strikingly generalised terms: ‘there is no authority except from God’ (*ou gar estin exousia ei me hupo theou* v.1), etc.<sup>21</sup> It is difficult to see a specific concern to encourage the Christians to pay their taxes as the real point of the instruction,<sup>22</sup> when this arises only as a supporting reason (*eis touto gar*) to indicate why subordination to the state, as God’s servant, is the appropriate course of action.<sup>23</sup> The second problem is that every verse of the Bible is, in a sense, equally bound to its context and its culture. It is ultimately inconsistent to limit the applicability of ‘difficult’ verses with this ‘local context’ strategy, without applying the same strictures to other, more appealing, passages (such as Gal 3.28) — often regarded as programmatic principles. The same critical distancing must be applied to the whole, the same hermeneutical considerations borne in mind in any attempt to move from the world of the text to the world of today. A third problem is that any text (and especially one which attains canonical status) gives rise to a range of meanings, gaining significance beyond that intended by its author: historical scholarship can function as an attempt to legitimate one reading over against others, but the various contested reconstructions sometimes only further demonstrate the multivalence of the text (see below).

Further light on Rom 13.1-7 may perhaps be shed by seeking to interpret the text in the light of its immediate literary context. We have already sketched the

content of 12.1-21; a brief resume of 13.8-14 will complete the picture. 13.8-10 highlights love of neighbour as the fulfillment of the law, giving an important indication of the extent to which Paul regards the *Torah* as conveying enduring moral authority; and 13.11-14 provides an eschatological motivation for moral living, concluding with an appeal to ‘put on (*endusasthe*) the Lord Jesus Christ’, an appeal that reiterates the basic call for transformed behaviour: in effect, ‘do not live like that, but like this’ (13.13-14). Furthermore, 13.1-7 is verbally linked both with what precedes and with what follows it: 12.9-21 begins and ends with references to Christians doing what is good (*to agathon*), a clear link to 13.1-7, where the authorities are not a cause of fear to those who do good (*to agathon ergon*; 13.3). Similarly, 13.7 is linked to the following section via the references to what one owes (*tas ophelias*, v.7; *opheilete*, v.8).

Thus, chapters 12-13 seem to have a roughly chiastic structure (ABCB'A'), opening and closing with the theme of transformation (12.1-2; 13.13-14), inside which is the theme of love, first along with a series of practical admonitions that embody it (12.9-21), and second as the commandment which summarises the whole law (13.8-10). If these approximately balancing sections form the AB/B'A', then the section in the middle is evidently 13.1-7, linked by key words to both what precedes and what follows it.

What might be the implications of this structural analysis for the understanding of Rom 13.1-7? Elsewhere too, in ethical teaching, Paul shapes his material in an ABA' form, and a middle section that seems digressive proves to be central to the argument as a whole (1 Cor 8–10 [chap 9]; 1 Cor 12-14 [chap 13]).<sup>24</sup> It is initially difficult to see how Rom 13.1-7 could function in this way in its wider argument, unless the instruction to be subject to the state is a central concern for Paul

in this wider section of instruction.<sup>25</sup> Even then, the passage hardly illuminates the surrounding contexts in the way that 1 Corinthians 9 and 13 do theirs. It is, however, possible to see Rom 13.1-7 as dealing with a crucial test-case of the Christians' external relations, and thus as providing a key exemplar of the instructions surrounding it. The call to be a community which clings to what is good and maintains the practice of peaceable non-retaliation (12.14-21) means that the Roman Christians can and should submit to the authorities whose God-given responsibility is to reward the good and punish evil;<sup>26</sup> and their call to be people whose only outstanding debt is the constant obligation to give themselves to the other in love (13.8-10) means that they should honour their debts to the state.

This does not, of course, resolve the many exegetical and hermeneutical problems surrounding these verses. Given that Paul had already suffered imprisonment and beatings at the hands of Roman 'justice', for following his God-given vocation as Apostle to the Gentiles, it is striking that he can speak here without any hint of reserve or irony of the state as God's servant in rewarding good and punishing evil.<sup>27</sup> Nor does Paul explicitly limit the extent of submission to the state,<sup>28</sup> although subsequent interpreters have frequently glossed his text with the qualification that obedience is owed only insofar as the state does not command or require anything that goes against the will of God.<sup>29</sup> The theological basis Paul gives is simply 'that there is no such actual power without God, that those in authority are virtually appointed by God to their function'.<sup>30</sup> As Klaus Wengst rightly goes on to comment (and despite exegetical efforts to relieve Paul of this dubious achievement)<sup>31</sup>: 'by doing that without caveat, qualification and dialectic, he [Paul] at least exposes himself to the danger of providing theological legitimation for *de facto* power no matter how it may have come into being and how it may be used'.<sup>32</sup>



Yet herein lies one of the enduring and intrinsic ambiguities of this text, enduring despite the efforts of exegetes to resolve its meaning one way or the other: the (Jewish) strategy Paul adopts *both* legitimates *and* limits the state's authority at one and the same time. Insofar as Paul — along with many other Jewish writers<sup>33</sup> — regards rulers as there because God has given them their position, he does add a certain divine legitimation to Roman imperial rule. But equally, by insisting that it is God who has granted the rulers their role, Paul, again along with the same Jewish writers, relativises their position: it is theirs not on the grounds of their own might or (pseudo-divine) status, but only because God has chosen to allow it to be so; and what God has granted God can equally take away — and may well do so soon (cf. Rom 13.11-14; 1 Cor 2.6, 15.24; 1 Thess 5.2-3).<sup>34</sup> This complexity and range of nuance is frequently obscured in arguments about whether Paul was *either* a liberator *or* an oppressor, a radical critic *or* conservative supporter of the *status quo*.<sup>35</sup>

There is one further issue, with considerable contemporary pertinence, that arises from Rom 13.1-7 in relation to its context in Romans. This concerns the obvious parallels of language between 12.19 and 13.4. In 12.19 Christians are forbidden from taking vengeance (*mê heautous ekdikountes*) and told to leave room for God's wrath (*orgê*). In 13.4 the governing authority is described precisely as God's servant (*diakonos theou*) to avenge God's wrath (*ekdikos eis orgên*) upon those who do evil. F.F. Bruce draws out the implication concisely: 'The state thus is charged with a function which has been explicitly forbidden to the Christian.'<sup>36</sup> J.H. Yoder develops the point: 'It is inconceivable that these two verses [12.19 and 13.4], using such similar language, should be meant to be read independently of one another.' For Yoder this 'makes it clear that the function exercised by government is not the function to be exercised by Christians ... the text cannot mean that Christians

are called to do military or police service...'.<sup>37</sup> As Bruce, Yoder and many others point out, the situation Paul assumes here is one in which Christians constitute a small, minority group with no access to, or participation in, state power. So how should the text be interpreted when that situation changes? For Yoder, and more recently Richard Hays, the answer is essentially to preserve the same separation between church and state: Christians are called to be a peaceable, non-violent people who cannot therefore participate in the (necessarily) forceful means by which the state seeks to enact justice, within or beyond its borders.<sup>38</sup> Hays' powerful chapter on the issue of violence, in his *magnum opus* on New Testament ethics, argues that the New Testament gives a consistent and unambiguous witness against the use of violence by Christians.<sup>39</sup> Hays passes very swiftly over Rom 13.4, noting only that: 'Though the governing authority bears the sword to execute God's wrath (13:4) that is not the role of believers'.<sup>40</sup> However, Hays does note one aspect of the New Testament material that goes against this univocality: the treatment of soldiers and the lack of any indication that their occupation was regarded as fundamentally immoral or incompatible with Christian discipleship (e.g. Luke 3.14; Acts 10.1ff).<sup>41</sup> Roman soldiers who converted (along with others involved in the service of the empire: cf. Phil 4.22) would be precisely people with involvement in both church and state activity, making the lack of any direct condemnation of their role, combined with Rom 13.4, rather significant, at least in terms of discerning the New Testament's position.

All this goes to show that, while the New Testament does indeed represent a tradition in which Christians are called to be peaceable and non-violent, with Rom 12.14-21 a key exemplar of this tradition, Rom 13.4 also opens up the possibility of a sanctioning of the use of force on the part of the state. If we acknowledge that

contemporary democracies provide rather different conditions from first century Rome, conditions in which Christians can have a voice and a role in shaping state activity, and a responsibility to do so as citizens of those states, then it is not entirely clear that that voice should *always* be against the use of physical force. Indeed, while the New Testament does not enunciate anything like the ‘just war’ tradition, later developed by Augustine and Aquinas, one can see how such a tradition might perhaps be a reasonable way to articulate a Christian position in a situation where Christians must straddle the gap between Rom 12.19 and Rom 13.4, seeking to be faithful to their responsibilities as members of the Church and members of their societies. It would seem to be at least in line with Romans to insist that any role for the state in fulfilling its role as God’s servant for vengeance must be undertaken only in the cause of halting evil and have as its goal the establishment of enduring peace.<sup>42</sup>

### Romans 14–15

In Romans 14 Paul turns to a specific issue affecting the internal dynamics of the Christian communities in Rome: differences in practices and ethical convictions regarding food, drink, and keeping special days, issues which pertain to ‘the observance or non-observance of the Jewish law’.<sup>43</sup> Although the instruction here is clearly dependent on Paul’s earlier formulation in 1 Cor 8-10, it is most likely directed to the specific situation in Rome rather than being simply a general paraenesis, as some have suggested. The particular issue concerns the differences between those Paul describes as ‘the strong’, who regard all foods as acceptable and all days as alike, and ‘the weak’, who follow dietary regulations and keep sabbath. Paul’s response to this situation is notable for the ways in which he attempts to foster the solidarity and unity of the whole community while at the same time legitimating the continuing differences of conviction and practice and removing the grounds for

criticism and judgment.<sup>44</sup> And he does this on theological and specifically christological grounds: appealing to Christ's position as Lord to undercut the Roman Christians' own tendency to judge one another (14.6-12), and to the pattern of Christ's self-giving as the model for other-regard (15.1-3), to give just two from many possible examples. While Paul makes his own stance plain — 'all things are clean' (*panta kathara*, 14.20), along with the loaded labels 'strong' and 'weak' in faith — he does *not* mount an argument to persuade others to adopt this ethical conviction. Rather, he provides a strong argument to legitimate a diversity of individual ethical convictions, indeed to legitimate a form of ethical relativism: 'nothing is unclean *in itself*, but it *is unclean* to the one who reckons it so' (14.14). Objectively, food is a matter of ethical indifference, but people *must* continue to follow the dictates of their own faith in this regard: 'everything that does not proceed from faith is sin' (*pan de ho ouk ek pisteôs hamartia estin*, 14.23). Paul's focus here, however, is not on the ethical question concerning food itself; rather it is the question of the relationships between these people with conflicting ethical positions that is his concern. The prominent moral imperatives are for each to act according to their own faith, and to avoid judging others, or causing them to stumble — that is, to act in a way which is, for them, sinful. Paul's appeal to the divergent groupings in the Roman churches, an appeal grounded on the theological basis of God's gracious welcome of all in Christ (14.3; 15.7), is to welcome and accept one another as *adelphoi*,<sup>45</sup> without judging or despising each other's different ethical practice (15.1-13). On the question of eating or not eating, Paul makes clear where he himself stands, but does not expect this ethical decision to be universalised. What he does demand as universal practice is reciprocal regard and respect, a way of peace and mutual up-building (14.19), within which coexisting forms of life may be respected.<sup>46</sup> Such a community of solidarity and

difference is the ethical embodiment of the gospel outlined in Rom 1–11, where Jew and Gentile, *as* Jew and Gentile, are equally and without distinction called to participate in the new life in Christ. And in doing so, Paul seeks to show, they are fulfilling the vision already glimpsed in scripture, of the nations (*ta ethnê*) coming together with God's people (*ho laos*) (15.9-13).

### ***Ethics and ethical dilemmas***

To what extent, then, was Barth right to suggest that these chapters contain no coherent pattern of thought, no systematic exposition of the themes of Pauline ethics? To the extent that Paul's exhortations here are orientated specifically to the needs and context of the Roman Christians then indeed they are situational and *ad hoc* rather than systematic. However, it is also the case that this influential section of Paul's most influential letter does set out Paul's teaching on key areas of Christian ethics, drawing on and resonating with much of his previous teaching in other letters, as well as setting out in ethical terms the implications of the theology conveyed in chapters 1–11. Insofar as Rom 1–11 is systematic, so too is Rom 12–15. In this concluding section, I shall set out some of these key ethical themes, as well as offering some reflections on their contemporary pertinence and problematic aspects.

#### **1. Transformation and non-conformity**

The headline of this section of Romans is one of Paul's most powerful and memorable expressions of the reorientation of the self which the gospel enables and requires (12.1-2), a reorientation which follows logically from the preceding chapters, with their exposition of the fate of humanity in Adam, under sentence of death, and the new possibility of life in Christ, empowered by the Spirit. Chapter 13 closes with a return to this very theme (13.11-14) which also resonates with Pauline teaching

elsewhere (Gal 3.27, 5.13-25; 1 Thess 5.1-10). This should serve to illustrate, once again, how profoundly Paul's ethical appeal is grounded in his theology, not as an appendix to his theological exposition, but as moral exhortation expressed in richly theological terms. We should perhaps be somewhat suspicious of Paul's rhetoric here (and elsewhere): the degree of distinction which he implies between Christians and 'this age' is at least blurred by the considerable extent to which Paul's moral teaching overlaps with both Jewish ethics and Greco-Roman traditions of moral philosophy.<sup>47</sup> However, Paul's words should also give us pause for thought, not least when we consider how completely Christians today remain conformed to the patterns of desire inculcated by the wider world (cf. 12.2; 13.14): the annual *Consumerfest* also known as Christmas, recently past as I write this essay, gives ample indication of how unquestioningly most members of most churches, at least in the West, follow capitalism's structuring of their means of self-expression.<sup>48</sup>

## 2. Solidarity and mutualism

In place of conformity to the world and its desires Paul presents the vision of a community in which human solidarity and mutual concern are nurtured. Romans 12 reiterates key Pauline ideas and exhortations: the community as one body, its members devoted to one another in love, sharing generously and looking to the needs of the other. Similarly, in dealing with issues which threaten to divide the congregations, in Romans 14–15, Paul engenders the solidarity of the Roman Christians, while at the same time finding ways to preserve their diversity. This value of *corporate solidarity* is a fundamental theme in Paul's ethics, although this is often insufficiently noticed in studies of Pauline ethics.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, when so much discussion of ethics focuses on what Stanley Hauerwas refers to as 'moral quandaries',<sup>50</sup> there is considerable importance in redirecting attention to these fundamentals: the central

challenge to any ethical theory, at least from a Pauline perspective, is to show how it proposes to engender such human solidarity. Focusing on specific issues of ethical practice, including the hot topics so frequently debated, is to tinker at the margins while neglecting to lay the foundations.<sup>51</sup>

### 3. Diversity and difference

Paul's use of the image of the body as a depiction of the Christian community serves well both as a basis for solidarity and as a means to legitimate diversity and difference, a concern evident in Rom 12.4-8 though developed more fully in 1 Cor 12.12-27. In Romans 14–15 Paul is also concerned to elucidate a basis for the preserving of difference among the community members, specifically concerning their customs regarding food, while at the same time engendering their solidarity with one another. Again this relates to central concerns of the letter as a whole: to depict Jew and Gentile as equally in need of salvation and equally able to be members of the people who are 'in Christ', yet without obliterating their differences (cf. Rom 1.16, 2.9-11, 9.3-5, 11.25-32). Once again this touches on a theme fundamental to any social or political ethic: how to nurture a sense of community while also ensuring that difference and diversity are not obliterated in a drive to conformity and sameness.<sup>52</sup>

### 4. Relations with outsiders and the State

Romans 12.14–13.10 constitutes Paul's longest discussion explicitly on the question of how Christians are to relate to those outside, and specifically those in authority, even though many other passages (notably in 1 Corinthians) deal with Christians' involvement in their wider society.<sup>53</sup> The theme of peaceable, non-retaliatory conduct clearly became established in early Christian paraenesis and Rom 13.1-7 forms a crucial case-study of how this should work in relation to the state authorities. That this

did not mean complete and unquestioning compliance with the state's demands is, however, amply demonstrated by those early Christians who cite this tradition even while facing martyrdom for refusing to curse Christ and swear by the genius of Caesar.<sup>54</sup> While these seven verses are often regarded as disjunctive and odd in their context in Romans and in the wider context of Pauline exhortation, they seem to fit meaningfully into the structure of chapters 12–13 and, moreover, represent a reasonably consistent spelling-out of the policy regarding outsiders concisely expressed in 1 Thess 4.11-12. The apparent contrasts between Romans 13 and 1 Corinthians 6 can also be easily explained: in 1 Cor 6.1-11 Paul is dealing with disputes *between* Christians, which should by no means be (voluntarily) taken to secular courts in pursuit of litigation; in Rom 13.1-7 Paul is dealing with the ways in which Christians (as a whole) should relate to external authority. All this does not, of course, negate or resolve the difficulties created by Paul's surprisingly unqualified call for submission to state authority.

## 5. Ethical dilemmas

Indeed, it is inevitable, reading Paul in a context very different from the one in which he wrote, that his instruction to the Roman Christians leaves us with gaps to fill in, dilemmas to wrestle with, and perhaps disagreements to be expressed, assuming we find some value in reading this particular ancient attempt to do ethics. We might, for example, simply want to reject Paul's rather strong legitimation of state authority. Christians who see the value and the challenge of the call to non-violence expounded in Romans 12, but who also see themselves as called to participate in their wider societies rather than to separate themselves from them, may sense the need for some way of straddling the gap between Rom 12.19 and 13.4: how are they to speak and to act as Christians who are also participant members of a state? Perhaps something like



the just war tradition will suffice here, or perhaps even that is too much of an accommodation to the values of ‘this present age’.

There are also problems, as well as much that is positive and challenging, in Paul’s attempt to forge a strong sense of corporate solidarity while sustaining difference and diversity. While this Pauline ethic contains much that is important for contemporary social and political ethics, it also raises questions: Given that Paul’s ethic is so inextricably bound up with his theology, can it make any contribution to the fostering of forms of human solidarity that transcend religious commitments, rather those based on a common identity ‘in Christ’? And how are the limits of tolerable diversity to be discerned, in churches and in societies, and can Paul help us here?

These questions begin to take us well beyond the scope of our essay, and beyond the specific concerns of Romans 12–15. Yet they also indicate, albeit briefly, some of the ways in which a contemporary appropriation of Paul’s ethics might need to proceed.<sup>55</sup> Paul’s ethics (and those of the Bible as a whole) do not provide anything like sufficient guidance for contemporary life, but neither should they be consigned to the shelves of history as a merely contingent response to specific problems in first century Christianity. Through a careful, critical, conversation with Paul, we contemporary readers can find resources of considerable value for our own very different attempts to ‘overcome evil with good’.

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especially to my *Gastgeber* Professor Gerd Theissen. I am also indebted to Cheryl Hunt and Todd Still for their comments on an earlier draft.

<sup>1</sup> This pattern of theology followed by ethics, or indicative followed by imperative, is, however, rather less apparent in most of the Pauline letters (that is, aside from Romans and Galatians) than is sometimes suggested (e.g. J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans* [WBC 38B; Waco, TX: Word, 1988] 715: ‘Paul has completed his theological exposition... Those in the Roman congregation who already knew his style would expect him to turn to some practical counsel’).

<sup>2</sup> K. Barth, *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (London: SCM, 1959) 151. More recently, cf. J. Ziesler, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: TPI, 1989) 290: ‘It is also now [at 12.1] that the letter becomes much more diffuse, and the tight structure that is a marked feature of so much of the argument of Romans becomes much less evident.’

<sup>3</sup> Barth, *Romans*, 151.

<sup>4</sup> See A.J.M. Wedderburn, *The Reasons for Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988); K.P. Donfried (ed.) *The Romans Debate: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991). Philip Melancthon (1497-1560), for example, famously referred to Romans as a ‘compendium of Christian doctrine’, while more recently Günther Bornkamm regarded it as Paul’s last will and testament (‘The Letter to the Romans as Paul’s Last Will and Testament’, in *The Romans Debate*, 16-28).

<sup>5</sup> J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998) 25.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g., R.J. Karris, ‘The Occasion of Romans’, in Donfried, *Romans Debate*, 71-77, who outlines the parallels between 1 Cor 8–10 and Rom 14.1–15.6; W.A. Meeks, ‘Judgment and the Brother: Romans 14:1–15:13’, in G.F. Hawthorne and O. Betz (eds), *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament: Essays in Honor of E. Earle Ellis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987) 290-300.

<sup>7</sup> Along with the commentaries, etc., further detail may be found in the valuable treatment of these chapters by M.B. Thompson, *Clothed with Christ: The Example and Teaching of Jesus in Romans 12.1–15.13* (JSNTSup 59; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Dunn, *Romans*, 705.

<sup>9</sup> Dunn, *Romans*, 716.

<sup>10</sup> Dunn, *Romans*, 706.

<sup>11</sup> Ulrich Wilckens rightly sees 14.1ff as the beginning of a new section, a piece of exhortation directed to specific issues at Rome, after the more general paraenesis of 12–13 (*Der Brief an die Römer* [EKKNT VI/3, Zürich: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1982] 79).

<sup>12</sup> The word itself occurs here for the first and only time in Romans, but the theme is much more prominent. Cf. also 15.9.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Barth, *Romans*, 150: ‘It is logical, it simply stands to reason that the life of the man on whom God’s mercy has been bestowed is as such a life which is intended to be presented to God.’

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 22-23.

<sup>15</sup> See J. Piper, ‘Hope as the Motivation of Love: 1 Peter 3:9-12’, *NTS* 26 (1980) 212-31; here 218-23.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979) II.648-50; Prov 25.21-22; 4 Ezra 16.53.

<sup>17</sup> J.C. O’Neill, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 209.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. J. Kallas, ‘Romans XIII.1-7: An Interpolation’, *NTS* 11 (1964-65) 365-74; Ernst Käsemann describes Rom 13.1-7 as ‘ein selbständiger Block... ein Fremdkörper in der paulinischen Paränese’, though not as an interpolation (*An die Römer*, HNT 8a; Tübingen: Mohr, 1974, p. 340).

<sup>19</sup> So, rightly, e.g. Dunn, *Romans*, 758-59.

<sup>20</sup> Examples, though with important differences among them, include N. Elliott, ‘Romans 13:1-7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda’, in R. Horsley (ed.) *Paul and Empire* (Harrisburg, PA: TPI, 1997) 184-204; further *idem*, *Liberating Paul* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994); J. Friedrich, W. Pöhlmann, and P. Stuhlmacher, ‘Zur historischen Situation und Intention von Röm 13,1-7’, *ZTK* 73 (1976) 131-66.

<sup>21</sup> It is now widely agreed that earthly, political authorities are in view in these verses, rather than angelic or spiritual powers (see Dunn, *Romans*, 760).

<sup>22</sup> As suggested, e.g., by V.P. Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1979) 126, 132-34; cf. also Friedrich, Pöhlmann and Stuhlmacher, ‘Zur historischen Situation’.

<sup>23</sup> As Dunn notes (*Romans*, 766), the *gar* indicates that the verb *teleite* must be taken as indicative, not imperative, though Friedrich, Pöhlmann and Stuhlmacher translate v.6: ‘Deshalb müßt ihr auch Steuern bezahlen’ (‘Zur historischen Situation’, 160).

<sup>24</sup> On the place of 1 Corinthians 9 in the argument of 8-10, see D.G. Horrell, ‘Theological Principle or Christological Praxis? Pauline Ethics in 1 Cor 8.1–11.1’, *JSNT* 67 (1997) 83-114.

<sup>25</sup> This might be the case if Paul is concerned in Romans to counteract rumours that he is a lawless person who promotes evil (cf. Rom 3.8; K. Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* [London: SCM, 1987] 82; R.E. Brown and J.P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome* [London: Chapman, 1983] 105-27) or if disturbances over the payment of taxes were a central concern of Paul's paraenesis here (cf. n. 22 above).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Wengst, *Pax Romana*, 81: '...relations with people outside the community ... are not to be different from those within the community, despite the aggression with which they meet [*sic*]. As a particular case of behaviour towards such people generally, Paul considers attitudes to those holding power in the state.'

<sup>27</sup> Cf. further Wengst, *Pax Romana*, 72-89. Elliott speaks of Paul's 'absurdly positive comments' ('Romans 13:1-7', 196).

<sup>28</sup> It should however be noted that Paul calls for submission (using *hypotassō*) rather than obedience (using *hypakouō*); note the distinction in the deutero-Pauline household codes, where wives are called to submit (Eph 5.24; Col 3.18), but children and slaves to obey (Eph 6.1, 5; Col 3.20, 22). While an unqualified call for submission hardly encourages a stance of critique or disobedience, it does at least indicate that Paul's concern is more with accepting one's place within a given 'order' (*tagma*) than with a blanket call for obedience *per se* (cf. also 13.1-2: *hypo theou tetagmenai eisin... tei tou theou diatagei*). Cf. Käsemann, *An die Römer*, 339.

<sup>29</sup> The Geneva Bible of 1560, for example, added the marginal comment to Rom 13.5: 'so farre as lawfully wee may: for if unlawful things be commanded us, we must answere as Peter teacheth us, It is better to obey God than men'. The politics of translation become clear in this connection: one of the motivations for the KJV was to counter such 'seditious' interpretations. See W. Wink, 'Neither Passivity nor Violence: Jesus' Third Way (Matt. 5:38-42 par.)', in W.M. Swartley (ed.) *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992) 102-25, here 114 with n.38, from where the Geneva Bible quotation is taken. Limiting the extent of obedience to the state by linking Romans 13 with the 'Petrine clause' of Acts 5.29 goes back to Hippolytus and Origen: see Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 45 with n.190.

<sup>30</sup> Wengst, *Pax Romana*, 83.

<sup>31</sup> E.g. N. Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, 226: 'Only the arrogant presumptions of our own privilege have allowed us to hear these verses as a sacred legitimation of power.'

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<sup>32</sup> Wengst, *Pax Romana*, 83-84.

<sup>33</sup> See e.g. Isa 45.1; Prov 8.15-16; Dan 4.17, 25, 32; Wisd 6.3; Josephus, *War* 2.140; 5.367; further Dunn, *Romans*, 761.

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. Dan 4.1-37; Wisd 6.1-6, etc.

<sup>35</sup> Cf., e.g., Margaret Mitchell's comments on Elliott, *Liberating Paul*: 'One should not... accept unquestioningly the rigid dichotomy which controls E.'s work (that Paul was either oppressor or liberator) but should press for more complex, mixed, and nuanced portraits of one who offers no simple social legacy' ('Review of Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul*', *CBQ* 58 [1996] 546-47; here 547).

<sup>36</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Tyndale, 1963) 238. Bruce explicitly makes the point that Paul gives no direct indication as to how a Christian ruler might reconcile the instructions of chapters 12 and 13.

<sup>37</sup> J.H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 199, 205.

<sup>38</sup> R.B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997) 317-46, esp. 342-43. Yoder makes the point that Rom 13 justifies the use of 'the limited violence of police authority' within the state's jurisdiction but does not treat the topic of war – the use of violence outside the boundary of the state (*Politics of Jesus*, 207). He still maintains that Christians cannot participate in this police activity, however. Given a profoundly different context, and the very limited extent to which this text details the range of legitimate state activity, it is, I think, a rather more open question as to what kinds of forceful state action this text might be taken to endorse.

<sup>39</sup> Hays, *Moral Vision*, 332, 341.

<sup>40</sup> Hays, *Moral Vision*, 331.

<sup>41</sup> Hays, *Moral Vision*, 335-36. Indeed, if Philip Esler is right, then one of the reasons for Luke's positive portrayal of Rome was 'that among the members of Luke's community were a number of Romans serving the empire in a military or administrative capacity, and that part of Luke's task was to present Christian history in such a way as to demonstrate that faith in Jesus Christ and allegiance to Rome were not mutually inconsistent' (*Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts* [SNTSMS 57; Cambridge: CUP, 1987] 210).

<sup>42</sup> And, as Stanley Hauerwas has shown, even adherence to the just war tradition would make Christians much more dubious and unreliable members of the military than they currently appear ('Why Gays (as a Group) are Morally Superior to Christians (as a Group)', in J. Berkman and M.

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Cartwright (eds), *The Hauerwas Reader* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001] 519-21). Given the times in which I am writing this essay (February 2003), I want to stress that the position outlined here is primarily an attempt to do justice to the details of Rom 12 and 13 rather than to sketch my own position on war. Although I can see Rom 13.4 giving certain scriptural justification to the use of state force, and while I might be persuadable that certain situations constituted a valid reason for the use of such force, I cannot see any such moral justification in relation to the current 'Iraq crisis'.

<sup>43</sup> J.M.G. Barclay, "'Do We Undermine the Law?'" A Study of Romans 14.1–15.6' in J.D.G. Dunn (ed.), *Paul and the Mosaic Law* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1996) 287-308, here 289.

<sup>44</sup> See further D.G. Horrell, 'Solidarity and Difference: Pauline Morality in Romans 14–15', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 15.2 (2002) 60-78.

<sup>45</sup> The term *adelphoi* (brothers and sisters), Paul's favourite term for referring to members of the churches, is emphatically repeated here, as in 1 Cor 8.11-13: it appears five times between verses 10 and 21 of chapter 14 (14.10 *bis*, 13, 15, 21). See further D.G. Horrell, 'From *adelphoi* to *oikos theou*: Social Transformation in Pauline Christianity', *JBL* 120 (2001) 293-311.

<sup>46</sup> It is, however, a moot and significant point, how far Paul effectively undermines the cultural and social identity of Jewish Christians, by insisting on their joining in commensality and community with non-Law-observant Gentiles (see further Barclay, 'Do We Undermine the Law?'; D. Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* [Berkeley/London: University of California Press, 1994]; Horrell, 'Solidarity and Difference'.)

<sup>47</sup> On which, see e.g. P.J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles* (Assen/Maastricht: Van Gorcum; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); A.J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989).

<sup>48</sup> Cf. further T.J. Gorringer, *The Education of Desire* (London: SCM, 2001)

<sup>49</sup> So, for example, Allen Verhey sees freedom, followed by love, as the most fundamental moral values for Paul (*The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984] 107-108). Hays, *Moral Vision*, 32-36, *et passim*, valuably highlights the prominence of *community* in Pauline ethics, though this is not quite the same as a focus on the ways in which Paul constructs and fosters forms of human solidarity.

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<sup>50</sup> S. Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) 4; see further S. Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny: The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998) 13-39.

<sup>51</sup> For further treatment of this and other themes mentioned here, see D.G. Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference: Towards a Contemporary Appropriation of Pauline Ethics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, forthcoming).

<sup>52</sup> A theme explored by E.A. Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991) who, however, accuses Paul of using power precisely in a drive towards sameness.

<sup>53</sup> Rom 13.8-10 is not, of course, concerned only, or even primarily, with relations with outsiders, but the use of the term 'neighbour' (vv.9-10), taken from Lev 19.18, cited in v.9, suggests that Paul's concerns are wider than those solely relating to Christians' dealings with 'one another'.

<sup>54</sup> See, e.g., *Mart. Pol.* 9.3–10.2; further Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 44-45.

<sup>55</sup> See further Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference*.