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### A Discussion of Killing in the New Testament

In Romans 13, Paul commands believers to submit to governing bodies, for governing bodies are set in place by God; but Acts 5:29 argues that God is to be obeyed over human authorities. How is it that believers are to submit both to earthly authorities and God? Paul states in Romans 13:4 that the swords of earthly authorities are given to them by God. It follows, then, that in espousing ungodliness, authorities forsake the right to their anointed swords. Thus, passages such as Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 are to be read as referring to authorities that uphold the law of God. In this paper, I will argue that the New Testament regards authority not as divine, but as divinely appointed, so that civility may be instilled amongst the people. By extent, authorities are given the right to enforce God's wrath upon wrongdoers. Execution, then, is condoned by the New Testament as a means of maintaining order. One in a position of authority is carrying out a divine mandate, in that they enforce a system of justice that God has put in place. Yet, if that authority is contrary to the will of God, Acts 5:29 makes it abundantly clear that those who follow God should not submit to it. While earthly order is of great value, its maintenance is not a sufficient excuse to tolerate wrongdoing.

The New Testament's discussion of killing is quite intertwined with matters of authority. Both Peter and Paul discuss the submission of believers to gentile authority so that God's authority may be established through terrestrial authority. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes that "whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur

judgement. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore, one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience." (Romans 13:1-5).

Similarly, Peter writes in chapter two of 1 Peter that "[for] the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish." (1 Peter 2:13-15). Both Paul and Peter are addressing the conundrum that most every Christian of the late 1st century found themselves in. Although the governments that presided over them were pagan in nature, it was the call of the Christians to honor their law, should it serve to advance what is right and punish those who do wrong. What they argue is that, although the Gentiles were hostile towards Christians, their rule kept intact the social order set forth by God, and that it was not becoming of Christians as followers of Christ to usurp social order according to the flesh. Although the ruling authorities do not give honor to God or to those who follow him, they still carry out his purpose. They are godless, but they are not lawless. In bearing the sword, they maintain the structure set in place by God.

In reading Romans 13, it is important to note that Paul commands the submission of Christians to gentile authority only if that authority does not contradict the will of God; that is, if the ruling power is conducive "to good conduct, [and not] to bad" (Romans 13:3, NRSV).

Peter touches upon this as well when he writes of accepting human authority. He holds that, for the sake of maintaining good standing with the gentiles, members of the church to whom his letter is addressed should accept the authority of every human institution (1 Peter 2:13, NRSV).

He goes on to instruct his audience to honor everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, and honor the emperor. However, that is not to say that he promotes the tolerance of grievous governments. He writes in verses 15 and 16 that “it is God’s will that by doing right [they] should silence the ignorance of the foolish,” thereby arguing not for the acquiescence of Christians to evil authority, but for the maintenance of upright conduct amongst the church so as to dissuade gentile gossip (Footnote on 1 Peter 2:12, HarperCollins Study Bible NRSV). What, then, does he have to say regarding the validity of authority that fails to punish those who do wrong and praise those who do right? Only that the church “must obey God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:29, NRSV). Although all human authority is put in place by God, not all human authority carries out the will of God. When an earthly edict contradicts the values set in place by God, then those who follow God are under no obligation to respect its authority. The powers that espouse evil do not instill civility amongst people, and thus neglect their divine appointment. In doing so, they forsake God’s authority. Therefore, adherents to the New Testament are under no obligation to submit to debased authority.

Both Paul and Peter argue that the sword of authority is wielded for the sake of those who stray from God’s commandments. Even amongst Gentile nations, order must be kept; and one of the means by which that is accomplished is the execution of those who incur such punishment upon themselves. God exerts his authority through the authority of those on earth, for they are more often than not the means by which he exacts justice upon wrongdoers. For an illustration of what Paul is referring to, consider the nations of Israel and Judah, formerly just the nation of Israel. Both shared the same origin, in that they both descended from Jacob, to whom God promised a great nation of his offspring. However, despite their divine antecedents, they both turn away from God in favor of their own idols. God, understandably incensed, lets both of the

kingdoms fall; Israel to the Assyrians, and Judah to the Babylonians. Although neither Assyria nor Babylon were godly nations, they were still used by God to exact justice upon the wicked Israelites and Judeans. Hence, as Paul later adds, “[it] is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore, one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.” (Romans 13:5, NRSV). Were one truly upright in their ways, they would have had no need to fear reproach from an authority. Paul instructs the Roman Christians to whom this letter is addressed to honor the Gentile authority, in spite of their pagan tendencies, so long as they hold to a law concurrent with that set forth by God.

In 1 Peter 2, Peter explores the same topic as that discussed in Romans 13, but from a slightly different perspective. In Romans 13, when discussing the conduct of an upright Christian, Paul commands the church in Rome to respect pagan authority so that God’s standard of order may be kept within society. Peter also directs the church to respect pagan authority, but he directs them to respect it for the sake of winning the favor of the Greco-Roman culture, which held the developing Christian religion with disdain and suspicion, if not outright contempt. He emphasizes submission to authority, but Peter places emphasis not on the divine appointment of authority, but on the need for his audience to win over the favor of the governing bodies with their upright conduct. “As servants of God,” he writes, “live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” (1 Peter 2:16, NRSV). Peter underscores the necessity of believers to submit to authority not so that they may avoid bad conduct, though that is implied; but so that their honorable deeds be visible before the Gentiles, and that the Gentiles may glorify God when he comes to judge (1 Peter 2:12, NRSV). Thus, Peter presents submission to authority by itself as a virtue.

Capital punishment, the killing of someone brought about by their own actions, was established in Genesis 9, when God said to Noah that he will require a reckoning for human life (Genesis 9:4, NRSV). This general principle helps to keep intact the fabric of society, in that it discourages individual shedding of blood by implementing a punishment, and that it prevents further killing by implementing an arbiter by whom justice is carried out. An absolute system of justice replaces vengeance, which is founded on individual pride, which is further founded upon disorder; with each individual determining for themselves what is right and wrong. Even in pagan nations, an objective order was recognized as necessary because it helped to keep in check the damages to society done through the dissension of individuals. Paul touches upon this earlier in Romans when he writes that “[for] what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world, his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.” (Romans 1:20). What Paul argues is that, though the Gentiles do not profess God, they recognize his attributes in his creation. Thus, in chapter 13, he commands the Church in Rome to submit to the Gentile government because, while it is not favorable to be ruled over by ungodly leaders, the disorder that results from individuals left to their own devices is far less preferable. The punishment of killing, even if carried out by an unbeliever, still advances the principle set forth in Genesis 9 that “Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed.” However, that is not to say that the New Testament upholds execution as the absolute means by which murder is to be dealt with. Christ’s sacrifice made righteous those who believe in him, for no one is able to attain justification based upon works of the law (Galatians 3:11, NRSV). Thus, the doctrine of salvation through faith allows for redemption, even of those guilty of such an abomination as murder. It is for this reason that the penitentiary system was

established by Quakers in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Rather than deal out punishments to those guilty of crimes, they found it more constructive to offer a place where transgressors may repent of their wrongdoing by recognizing Christ as their redeemer. While it is true that, for the sake of societal integrity, transgression must be recognized, it is much more edifying for society if the punishment for the transgression leads to repentance of the transgressor. While it can be argued that, since Paul uses imagery pertinent to capital punishment in his declaration of authority as appointed by God, he does not explicitly endorse capital punishment as the principle means by which such perpetrators are to be dealt with. Rather, he uses imagery familiar to the audience to convey the broader message that “[it] is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.” (Romans 13:4, NRSV). Failure to keep the law necessitates punishment, but Paul writes earlier in Romans that “since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. [God] did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed.” (Romans 3:23, NRSV), thereby asserting that, though every single child of Adam is a sinner in the eyes of God, Christ served as a propitiation for them. This establishes both the necessity of the death penalty, in that it is necessary to restrict the rebellious nature of Adam, and the superiority of a system in which those who commit murder are offered life in Christ.

The New Testament specifically discusses killing with respect to authority. It does not advocate for murder, nor does it call for accidental deaths, although the bloodguilt of said act has been absolved by Jesus’s crucifixion, but it does allow for the implementation of capital punishment so that order may be maintained. It adheres to the doctrine of original sin, and thus allots for a means by which Adam’s iniquity may be kept in check. Since Adam is inherently

disobedient, God must rule over man through authority, even if that authority does not worship God. Both Humanity's need for authority and rejection thereof are present in any one of its constituent members; that is to say, that there is an innate drive in man to both desire authority and despise it wholly. Paul touches upon this dichotomy when he writes "[for] what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made." (Romans 1:20). He expands upon this further in the next chapter, going so far as to say that "[when] Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness" (Romans 2:14-15). Thus, Paul argues that both believers and unbelievers alike have a natural tendency towards law and order. For this reason, believers ought not to reject the authority of a pagan nation simply for the reason that they are pagans; for, while they are not of God, they are still implementing his goal of law and order. The act of murdering someone asserts one's own law above that of the established law, and in doing so undermines the rest of the law, for it incites vengeance, which, when allowed to fester, will ultimately lead to anarchy. The original sin was one of pride, in that Adam fancied themselves wise enough to usurp God's established order. This is mirrored in the tale of their two offspring, Cain and Abel. Though God ordered Cain not to commit wrongdoing with regards to his brother Abel, Cain's jealousy overcame him and he killed Abel anyways. This sin only propagated further as Cain's lineage progressed. Lamech, one of Cain's offspring, boasts of avenging himself against someone who wounded him, going so far as to say that his own wrath is many times that of his progenitor. Peter and Paul both recognize all authority as set in place by God, because, according to the

Bible, all authority stems from God, as God is the ultimate authority. Thus, so that civil order may be held, capital punishment is given to the authorities set in place by God, whether they give honor to him or not. However, the concept of grace as laid out in Romans and Galatians undermine the necessity of the death penalty. Authorities are given leave to use the death penalty as they see fit, but death spread to all people, because all have sinned (Romans 5:12, NRSV). The New Testament makes allowances for capital punishment, but it holds to the command found in Deuteronomy to choose life. Although punishing a murderer would be effective in maintaining social order, it would benefit society infinitely more if that murderer were redeemed; loving the Lord, obeying him, and holding fast to him. Therefore, though there is still a place for capital punishment in extreme cases where the safety of the public would have been otherwise compromised, it is better that the individuals who incur the wrath of capital punishment be given an opportunity for redemption through Jesus Christ; to be welcomed “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother.” (Philemon 16, NRSV).



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