

## **SYSTEMS SO PERFECT**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton  
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Scripture: Psalm 46; Romans 13:1-14

Rome in the first century and America in the dawning of the twenty-first century are two quite distinct points of reference. So when Paul writes to the fledgling Christians in Rome that they “must be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and that those authorities have been instituted by God,” he is speaking to a very specific situation in the history of the church. He is not writing an essay on church-state relations, nor giving general instructions for all times and all places.

In 49 A.D. Jews had been expelled from Rome by Claudius because, there had been constant disturbances caused by those new Jewish Christians. Claudius saw Christianity as a sect of Judaism, and thought it best to rid the Empire of this annoyance. So he banished them.

In 64 A.D. Claudius’ successor Nero blamed the Christians for the great fire of Rome and called them “enemies of the human race,” a charge one might hear only in the most right wing of Muslim madrasahs today. But Nero needed someone to blame, and the Christians were easy targets.

So when Paul advised the followers of Christ in Rome to be subject to their earthly rulers he was trying to make it clear that the Christian life itself does not call for resistance against government authority or withdrawal from public life.

Paul advises that we should be subject to earthly authorities, but that advice needs to be understood in the time and place in which that instruction was given. “Time makes ancient good uncouth,”<sup>1</sup> the old hymn of the church says, and it’s easy to see how Paul’s advice to the early Roman Christians did not wear well in the Twentieth Century in Germany after the rise of Hitler and the National Socialist Party.

The Confessing Church in Germany stood against Hitler and the Nazis by publishing the Barmen Declaration, a strong statement against a political regime that demanded total submission to its absolute authority. At great risk to life and freedom, the signatories of that Barmen Declaration like Karl Barth and Martin Niemöller, affirmed that the head of the church is Jesus Christ not the head of the state. It was an affirmation that would cost them dearly.

Paul’s advice, then, must be heard in its own historical context and setting in order to explore its meaning for us today.

That being said, it is fair to say in an election year like this that we as a nation often pin our hopes on the policies and promises of this party or that, this candidate or that one, as if the kingdom of God will be ushered in on inauguration day, January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

To listen to the rhetoric of the candidates, one might easily imagine that the clouds will disperse and the heavens open over the steps of Congress and above the inaugural platform, while the newly elected President descends on clouds of glory with angel choruses accompanying him.

But most of us have all lived long enough to know that such expectations are not likely to be fulfilled. You can go to YouTube on the Internet and find the video clips from Jon Stewart and the Letterman show, and they will make it clear how the promises of an incumbent president weigh against actual performance after eight years.

Life and politics change and the unexpected make the promises of today difficult to fulfill. The best we can do is judge the character, demeanor, and wisdom of the candidates during the campaign. For they are after all the raw material the President will use to lead the nation when in office.

I would not want to take away hope for change and improvement. Both candidates are expressing that desire. And I think there is hope in the air in these election days, even in the midst of terrible financial upheaval, there is hope. But to cast the mantle of a messiah around the shoulders of any political candidate is at the least to expect too much of him or her, and at the worst, idolatrous.

How easily we forget the fact that God never really wanted Israel to have a king. God was happier without one. The book of Judges in the Old Testament ends with a cryptic phrase, "In those days there was no king in Israel, all the people did what was right in their own eyes."

There is that poignant scene described in the book of First Samuel when God reminds Israel that it was God who led them out of Egypt and guided them through the Red Sea. It was God who took them to the promised land, a land of milk and honey. God had done these things. But still they wanted a king mostly because all of their enemies had kings. So Saul was anointed king; but he was not such a great king after all, because at the end of his life, it was said of Saul that God "was sorry that he had made [him] king over Israel."<sup>2</sup>

Of course, David, Saul's successor, would become the greatest king in all of Israel's history, the one against whom all subsequent kings would be measured. But even the great King David was haunted by ill-fated choices, sexual indiscretion, moments of lapsed judgment.

The scripture's clear bias is that the best ruler over the earth is God, and all earthly substitutes are distant seconds. In other words, politics is what we have when we won't take God. But given the circumstances, it's better that we have an earthly ruler to help us at least to approximate justice and peace in the land. Better that than nothing.

This flies in the face of our popular understandings of national leadership and the role of the nation. We have, after all, a national mythology of chosenness, a Manifest Destiny that we were meant to fulfill, a North American version of the New Israel.

John Winthrop at the time of the Pilgrim landing at Plymouth Rock in 1620 said of this new land, "We shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us..." And John Rolfe told the early settlers of Virginia that they were, "a peculiar people, marked and chosen by the finger of God."

At the time of the Revolutionary War, the imagery of Americans as a Chosen People took on new energy. And in 1788 Samuel Langdon preached to the good people of Concord, New Hampshire, "We cannot but acknowledge that God hath graciously

patronized our cause and taken us under his special care, as he did his ancient covenant people.”<sup>3</sup>

With a view of ourselves like that, how disappointing is the realization that we cannot live up to such a designation, and even more so, that we are not meant to. God’s election of Israel as a chosen people is not for privilege, or station, not meant to exempt it from the world community as set *apart*, but a call to be set *within*, a call to service and self-sacrifice that shall be an example to all the nations.

Recently in an interview with Charles Gibson, Governor Sarah Palin referred to a quote attributed to Abraham Lincoln. An interesting juxtaposition! Ms. Palin got it somewhat correct, but let me quote Mr. Lincoln precisely. Lincoln responded to a comment made by a “clergyman who ventured to say, in his presence that he “hoped the Lord was on our side.” “I am not at all concerned about that,” replied Mr. Lincoln, “for I know that the Lord is always on the side of the right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord’s side.”<sup>4</sup>

And that, of course, is the more difficult part to accomplish.

We are a long way from Paul’s admonition to the Romans to be subject to the governing authorities. It’s much more complicated than that, and Paul did not know democracy or participatory government in the way that we do. He was a subject of Rome and the citizen of an Imperial Empire. Unlike Paul, we must participate in our governance not simply be subject to it, for participation is the essence of a democratic society.

The role of the church it seems to me is not to endorse candidates nor to take partisan positions that are aligned with one political group or another. The IRS under this administration has already investigated enough churches and pastors to make that point perfectly clear.

The role of the church is to remind us, who are Christian that we have a dual citizenship, that we are accountable to a higher authority and that every aspect of our life must be seen and understood in light of that accountability, even our choice of public servants. Since we cannot have a perfect king or President, as the scriptures would have it, we must find a human person with all too human flaws and imperfections to help us to do justly in this democracy, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

In T.S. Eliot’s poem *Choruses from The Rock*, Eliot asks, “Why should men love the church?” He answers,

She tells them of Life and Death, and of all that they would forget.  
She is tender where they would be hard, and hard where they like to be  
soft,  
She tells them of Evil and Sin, and other unpleasant facts.  
They constantly try to escape  
From the darkness outside and within  
By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good...

And it’s that last part that so captures the situation in which our country stands on the eve of a national election. We are looking for candidates who will say things we like

to hear, and imagine things we would like to imagine, who will somehow make things better because of what they will do to change the world for the better, to save the economy and hold the line on taxes. And the less inconvenience we suffer as citizens, the better.

Neither candidate speaks much of sacrifice, or calls us to conserve, or imagines that we must change our style or way of living, or says that any of our assumptions must be re-evaluated. But if we are to live in a more just, and sustainable, and peaceful world, we will not be able to continue to live as profligately as we have in the past.

The economy, the environment, the rising of radical movements in religious thought around the world, are all teaching us that something fundamental must change, that things are not working as they should, and that if we are to survive this turbulent time, it will be because we *all* look out for one another more determinedly in the future, than we have in the past. The old patterns and ways of “everyone for themselves” must give way to a shared and common concern for the good of all. We are most assuredly our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers.

We have seen the best and the worst of times in a very short period. And now it is an inescapable fact that there must be some major adjustments in the way in which we live. The rich have become too rich, and the poor are too poor. And that is not a political statement, that is a theological statement. For if we have no concern for the poor, even the poor among us, what kind of nation are we?

The late Bill Coffin, former pastor of the Riverside Church once put it this way, “Jesus was concerned most with those society counted least and put last. A politically engaged spirituality can never neglect the plight of those most deprived and vulnerable and will insist that improving the lot of the most oppressed is the decisive test of political sincerity.”<sup>5</sup>

No political candidate that we elect as President can save us. We cannot create systems so perfect that no one will need to be good. We must care and become involved in shaping the welfare of a nation that is striving to be the most compassionate and just of all nations on earth, fulfilling our founders’ greatest hopes for themselves and for us, to be a city set on a hill.

This is not accomplished by one person elected to office, it is accomplished by a people who are good, who seek to do the good, who balance profit with justice. Who become involved in their community. Who vote and volunteer. Who pray and are engaged in the social outreach of the church and of society. Who help with the homeless shelter and who adopt children whom no one wants. Seniors who sing with a chorus of other seniors in nursing homes and adults who volunteer as tutors in a blighted city school. These are the marks of people working toward a better nation, a more faithful society.

Judge Walter Mansfield, who was a Federal District Court Judge and then Appeals Judge here in the Southern District of New York, was a parishioner in another church I served many years ago. Judge Mansfield, who was a learned jurist, once gave a lecture to an adult education class at the church. He said that while the founders of the nation saw fit to amend the constitution with a Bill of Rights, ten in number, he always

thought that there should be at least an equal number of parallel *responsibilities*, a Citizens Bill of Responsibilities, if you will.

I don't remember all the responsibilities he mentioned but I do remember a few: to vote, to pay taxes in order to accomplish a greater good, to offer some form of national service either in the military or some other, to serve on juries, to become educated to the greatest degree possible, to read the news and be discerning in judgment. Those were some. And I have always pondered that wisdom; that along with rights, we must also bear responsibilities to protect them.

Senator McCain said it pretty well at the Saddleback Interview, "After 9/11 we should not have told people to go shopping or take a trip, we should have told them to join the Peace Corps, Americorp, the Military, expand our volunteers, serve a cause greater than your self interest."

And Senator Obama on the same evening put it this way, "As a nation we still don't abide by that basic precept in Matthew, that whatever you do for the least of my brothers you do for me. And that basic principle applies to poverty, it applies to racism, sexism, it applies to not providing ladders of opportunity for people to get into the middle class. There is a pervasive sense that in a nation as wealthy and powerful as we are, we still don't spend enough time thinking about 'the least of these.'"<sup>6</sup>

We are a long way from Paul's admonition to the Romans to be subject to earthly authorities. A democracy requires the involvement of its people. A nation trying to do the good, demands the time and devotion and strenuous engagement of its citizens.

As we approach these final days before we elect national leaders, I would urge you to adjust your expectations about what this new President will be able to accomplish. He will not usher in the kingdom of God. But with the hard work and commitment, and ingenuity and dedication of a nation which is trying to do good in the world there is a possibility that President Lincoln's anxious hope may be fulfilled, not that the Lord will be on our side, but that we will be on the Lord's side.

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<sup>1</sup> *Once to Every Man and Nation*.

<sup>2</sup> I Samuel 15:35.

<sup>3</sup> These three historical quotations are taken from Roy H. May, Jr., *Joshua and the Promised Land*, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Francis B. Carpenter, *Six Months in the White House with Abraham Lincoln*, 1867. p. 282.

<sup>5</sup> William Sloan Coffin, *Credo*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004. 68.

<sup>6</sup> Both quotes from Sen. McCain and Sen. Obama are verbatim transcripts from the Saddleback Civil Forum on the Presidency,