

Regime Change and the Word of God. Some Theological Reflections

In a famous passage in Romans 13 St. Paul claims that “there is no [worldly] authority except from God and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists such authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”

Paul said this when Nero was Roman emperor. He was the Saddam Hussein in Paul’s day—brutal, bloody and possibly crazy. Yet Paul, eventually practicing what he preached, appeals to Nero to adjudicate the legal charges against him (Acts 25), journeys to Rome on that appeal and most likely dies at Nero’s hand. Does that prove that Paul was mistaken? We’ll never know whether Paul thought so or changed his mind on this one.

If Nero can be “God-appointed,” why not Saddam Hussein? That’s a tease. Granted, Paul was talking about top-down ruler/subject relations. But couldn’t the same be said about ruler/ruler relations? Even if one or both are tyrants? It bends the mind. When Luther once wondered out loud why God would put political authority into the hands of tyrants at all, he concluded: “God gives people the rulers they deserve. God frequently uses one scoundrel to punish another.” Ouch! Luther wasn’t talking about foreign governments. It was local princes within the Holy Roman Empire, people he knew first hand. But note the axiom for God’s operations: just deserts whereby God dishes out equitable recompense inflicting one scoundrel on another. So Luther reasoned, claiming Paul’s words for precedent.

Suppose that Paul’s political theology is correct. Then God runs

“regime changes.” Granted he does so through human political power mechanics. Most often. Some rulers just drop dead—others get assassinated—as God manages the managers of secular authority. But for any outsider to claim authorization to make regime change happen? That takes chutzpah. In the OT God did now and then whisper to a future incumbent that he was God’s chosen as next in line and that he should press on with regime change. The change-agent was frequently a bloody sword. One scoundrel recompensing another.

The “God-instituted” regime in the USA is presently hyping regime change for another country. Seems to me that’s theologically dicey for several reasons.

1. Right off the bat, that’s self-chosen entry into God’s own reciprocity regime. “Not recommended,” says Jesus himself (Matt. 7:1ff.): “With the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.” So move very carefully when you’re an agent for God’s left-hand regime. God’s rubrics here are very simple: tit for tat. After these words comes Jesus’ zinger about the folly of folks with logs in their own eye removing the specks from the eye of another. He concludes using the “dirtiest word” in his vocabulary for such folks. Check it out yourself.
2. Where’s the divine authorization? When two squabbling brothers wanted Jesus to adjudicate their conflict, he responded: “Who made me judge over you?” He said he didn’t have such authorization. So he did not intervene. But he did signal that authorization is not a trivial issue.
3. If there is no authorization—from God—for imposing a regime change, then grim consequences can be expected. Especially for the one imposing the change! He “resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” The Greek word rendered “resist” is a military

term “to face off in battle.” To face off in battle against God is a sure recipe for disaster—not only losing face, but life as well.

4. There seems to be some consciousness among our American leaders that they do need theological justification for the regime change they are pursuing. But the theology—though quintessential American theology—is very bad theology. It goes like this. We are God’s chosen people. We have a mission (from God) for the world. Thus we are the good guys. And our enemies—especially such villainous ones as the ruler in Iraq—are God’s enemies too. The language of good and evil is the easiest way to frame the situation. It’s clear which side we’re on. That’s not even discussable. Only our enemies (or dubious allies) question that. So every “axis of evil” is fair game for us “axis of good” folks. And finally it IS a divine mission. Not just us, but God with us against evil. The Bible says so.
5. Some of you will recognize the classic name for this theology: “Manichaeism” [man-uh-KEY-un-ism, accent on the middle syllable]. Its founder was a Persian (! = right next-door to today’s Iraq) named Mani (Manichaios, in Greek) living in the third century A.D. He was a brilliant widely-travelled religious philosopher, a compelling teacher, a talented organizer. He’d been to India and China to study religions there, had contacts with Christians, considered himself to be one. Signed his letters “Mani, the apostle of Jesus Christ.” He died by crucifixion at the hands of Zoroastrian priests in Persia in the year 273. Was he a Christian martyr or a heretic? The early church said heretic. So does the Augsburg Confession. “The heresy of the Manichaeans” is the first one condemned in the AC. Says Heussi: “Manichaeism entered the western Roman empire in the late 3rd and 4th

centuries, a most dangerous competitor of the church. Though outlawed by imperial edict in 296 Manichaeism vexed the church throughout the centuries as a tempting sectarian option inside the church." And it's back again.

6. So what is it? The central notion of Mani's theology is a sharp dualism (linked no doubt to the Zoroastrian world he lived in); two primordial elements, light and darkness, are positioned against each other. One is clearly good, the other evil. The result is cosmic conflict, played out throughout the cosmos, focused here on earth. Salvation is for the entire cosmos. It comes where the children of light, assisted, of course, by the transcendent power of light, conquer the powers of darkness. This cosmic alliance for good finally puts down the cosmic axis of evil. It cannot fail. Victory is guaranteed.
7. Granted, even among the children of light, not everyone has the full picture. There are some who are the "perfect" with inside knowledge of how the cosmic network runs. But that's not true for everyone of the light-folks. Some are still partly in the dark, possibly couldn't rightly interpret even if they were given full intelligence about the cosmic realities. Others are still listening and learning. They still have a ways to go. I'm not making this up. That was Mani's version of what Christ was all about. Therefore he signed off as "the apostle of Jesus Christ," and not just apostle for Persia (today's Iran). His proposal was a world-wide religion with world-wide salvation, entailing a planetary program that would finally make the world "safe" from the evil networks of darkness.
8. Now do some crossings on your own. Replace the nouns in the 2 previous paragraphs with those in the headlines today—terrorists, war on same, networks, Osama, Saddam, Taliban, Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, the American people,

Muslim fundamentalists, our allies, the “intelligence community,” weapons of mass (=cosmic) destruction, the constant rhetoric of good vs. evil, of good’s assured victory over evil. . . . It’s Mani all over again, isn’t it? And the religious factor of us vs. them—as fuzzy as that all is here—though publicly denied, is in, with, and under everything.

9. But Christians dare not forget that Mani was a heretic then, and the Made-in-America version of his plan of salvation is heresy still.
10. “Aut disce aut discede.” That Latin epigram was the lead-in for last week’s ThTh. “Either discern or decease.” In world politics Americans seem to have a learning handicap. We fought evil in Korea and we didn’t win. Cease-fire was the best we got. We fought evil in Vietnam and they beat us. All we got was 50,000 body bags returned to the USA. What our most recent Asian war against evil (Afghanistan) will finally bring us is still a conundrum. And the once-hyped main point of that one, “Get Osama,” never happened. So we’ve conveniently forgotten—in just a few months—that it was the rallying cry. Our learning curve in international politics, for all our smarts, doesn’t have much of an arch. Our Mani-mentality factors in to flatten it.
11. Another Asian war? What makes us think that victory is assured—as most everyone seems to be saying, even the critics who speak against it? We were the most powerful military nation on earth during the V-N war and the “little men” of that land licked us. We are even more super-super militarily now, but why trust that as a guarantee for victory? Someone recently said—not thinking he was speaking theology—“Don’t play chess with someone from the land where the game was invented. [And then sotto voce: Especially if you’re a rancher from Texas.] No

matter how mega-sized your chess pieces are, it's about brains, not brawn." Yes, that is macabre. Even more so in the political chess-game with the One who invented (instituted) it. Here especially "aut disce, aut discede" applies. Either learn or die. At least learn the word of God in Matthew 7 and Romans 13. That's not enough Word-of-God yet to get you saved. But it can delay your demise.

12. Goliaths get toppled, lose their heads even, in Biblical geo-politics. The "little guy" regularly walks away the winner. Not because he was more virtuous in the supposed good-vs.-evil cosmic battle, but merely on the grounds of his godly authorization. So it's back to Romans 13. Who is God's authorized agent for what in the current geo-political arena? That's doubtless not easy to answer, but why not try anyway? Even with "freedom of religion" so fundamental in our land, has this ever been discussed in the US public arena? Not that I know of. And it is important, not just to get our theology straight, but for our own survival—and that of a multitude of others as well.
13. Which brings us back to the theme of last week's ThTh 222, the R-word repentance. Even though the epigram "discern or de cease" doesn't invoke the deity, it is a cameo version of Preacher Niedner's Ezekiel 33 text of last week, especially 33:9. "If . . . they do not turn from their ways, they shall die in their iniquities." Ezekiel claims it's "The Word of the Lord." Expressed positively: learn and turn and live. Seems to me Paul concurs in Romans 13. If you don't "learn" your political theology right, you have no theological grounds for optimism at all with any regime changes you undertake. Worse yet, you "will incur judgment."
14. Mani was wrong. He was not "the apostle of Jesus Christ." He proposed an "other" gospel. Ditto for his apostles

today. So do not trust Mani's gospel no matter who proposes it. Granted Mani too got crucified for his gospel, but that doesn't validate it. Two centuries earlier Another One also got crucified. He had a different gospel. We hear that God vindicated him after three days. God eastering Jesus was God counter-signing Jesus' gospel (with his right hand, of course!), the same God who "institutes worldly authorities" (with the other). The bottom line finally is that simple: "aut Mani aut Jesus"—either one or the other—with two contrary gospels for ultimate salvation and for temporal survival. And you can only choose one.

Peace and Joy!

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