

# **The Church and Corona:** Publicans and Zealots

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## Fear God. Honor the emperor.

-1 Peter 2:17

### Introduction

"For I set every man against his neighbor." This is not an overview of the year 2020, but rather a statement of the prophet Zechariah, in around 520 B.C. And yet this statement is so contemporary that one could easily make a newspaper headline out of it.

Politics has become extremely aggressive. Activists shoot themselves in the street. Communities are spilt. Families are torn apart. Good friends can no longer pray together.

We find ourselves facing a time like Zechariah 8-10. No one has common sense, or knows a little bit of Church history, or basic knowledge of the doctrine of the end times, yet no one will deny that eschatologically, the time we are living in is extraordinary.

God is doing a great work! He is beginning His judgment in the house of God (1 Peter 4:17) before He will judge the world. He is teaching his Church the fear of God before he teaches the world to fear.

We can have three attitudes towards God's actions: we can despise it, it can wear us down, or it can exercise us (Hebrews 12).

But even among those who are "exercised", there is friction. Why?

Superficially, one would say that this friction comes from questions like "As a Christian, may I...?" or "As a Christian, should I...?" I get asked these questions 10-20 times a day, at least. Unfortunately, this type of question shows more about us as questioners than we might expect. It reveals that we have understood very little about being "new in the Spirit" and still cling to the "old way of the written code". For new converts, this is perfectly normal, but for people who have been in the faith for years and who take partial responsibility in the Church (ministry, service, etc.) it is alarming.

But the fact that we want rules of conduct also shows a much deeper problem: **we have an identity crisis**. We no longer know who we are and therefore do not know what to do. We have lost our point of reference and are flying aimlessly like asteroids in space - until things blow up.

Because identity determines behavior. Who you are will influence what you do. We are living beings, that is why we eat. We are souls, that is why we love. We are spirit, therefore we pray. We are athletes, that is why we run. We are builders, that is why we build and we are the Church, that is why...? Yes - what comes now?

- we put masks on because the government told the Church to
- or we don't put on masks, claiming that we are freedom fighters and that the state *cannot tell us anything*.

Exactly, that is the question. There are two extremes: the zealots and the publicans.

The Zealots were a religious group who not only questioned the authority of Rome, but physically tried to overthrow Rome. The publicans, on the other hand, took advantage of Rome's supremacy by collaborating with the occupying power and thus gained a self-created authority among their brothers.

In order not to fall into one extreme or the other, I would like to do two things. I would like to point out:

1) what **Government** is

2) what the **Church** is

3) and from this, we should automatically understand **who we are** and how we have to behave.

## 1. What Government is.

### 1.1 Why does Government exist? Why does God let Humans govern?

#### **In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.**

*–Genesis 1:1*

From the very first verse of the Bible, a hierarchy already prevailed, which was foreshadowed by the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1; Daniel 4:23). Everything in creation is placed in a God-willed relationship, with man as the head and representative of God. Even within man, who was created male and female, there is a hierarchy, an order, though it has nothing to do with value.

Through the Fall of Man, a deeply dark **disparity** has come into these God-willed loving relationships, so that animals, for example, no longer recognize man as their head, or male humans despotically dominate their female partners. Since this downfall, God has been working to win back the heart of man. He does this in history (time) and on earth (space). However, in order to have room for maneuver, he must physically stop evil. He must preserve man from destroying himself. This is actually the purpose of (human) government here on earth: to maintain order so that God can act. Also in the NT, 1 Timothy 2:1-4 emphasizes the idea that authorities are necessary so that Christians can live a "quiet and peaceful life" and preach the gospel.

Since the Fall, God has been doing this through various governmental forms, each of which has punitive instruments at its disposal. Here are 3 examples:

- Family: Education (Proverbs 23:13-14)
- State: the sword (Romans 13:4; Genesis 9:6)
- Church: the loosening and binding (Matthew 16:19)

As for political government, God had chosen the descendants of Abraham and made a nation out of them. (Genesis 18:18; Amos 3:2). After a long period of God's patience with Israel, the people were led

into captivity and the power of government was transferred to the other nations. This marked the beginning of "the time of the nations" - with the Kingdom of Babylon and in the person of Nebuchadnezzar. (Daniel 2:37-38); three other kingdoms followed Babylon - and continue to this day. This period will last until Christ returns as the Messiah to save Israel and "the times of the nations are fulfilled" (Luke 21:24).

## 1.2 Who is the government?

The divine form of government is unquestionably a theocratic monarchy (Isaiah 33:22; Isaiah 52:7). However, it can only function if both elements are present: God and the king.

Only Jesus Christ guarantees both! But Jesus is not yet the visible king of this world.

Therefore we must not make the mistake of confusing God's *ideal* form of government (monarchy) with God's *current* form of government (democracy). What I mean to say is that we should not strive for monarchy while the king is not yet here. We would otherwise be guilty of pouring new wine into old skins. We would try to impose a perfect system on an imperfect world. The result would not be royalty, but a dictatorship.

What is the most successful form of government in terms of peace and prosperity? **Democracy.**

Since the authorities are appointed by God, this means that God's current form of government for the Western world is democracy. Of course, this is not the only form of government in the world today, but this model has given Christians the greatest possible freedom and produced the most prosperous countries. Democracy is the best form of government to contain evil. Both within the people and within the government.

Democracy has a catch, however: it is a form of government which the Bible does not "know" – it is not mentioned. This is important to note, because in a democracy the relationship between rulers and their subordinates is fundamentally different than in a monarchy or dictatorship. Therefore, we need to understand what Paul means in Romans 13 (see below for exegesis) and then translate it to the situation today.

Paul uses the word *exusia* when speaking about the government. This word means *power of authority* or *command*. In some verses it can also mean *law*. In a democracy, this power is divided among three different bodies. We call this the separation of powers: the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. These three bodies are servants of the people. So the people rule (democracy = rule of the people). The people are at the top and ultimately the people are the final authority. Underneath is the constitution, on which the people have agreed. The constitution is therefore the most important document, on which all *citizens and executors/rulers* must be judged. The people and the constitution are in the words of 1 Peter

2:13 the *king* and the *government*. Democracy is currently a God-ordered system and it is ideal both for religious freedom and for the preaching of the Gospel.

Moreover, the principle that those in power must abide by the law is not a principle that is foreign to the Bible. Adam, who represented God on earth, also had a commandment which he himself was not allowed to violate. Proverbs 31 also teaches us that even kings must obey the law:

*It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine... lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.* –Proverbs 31:4-5.

Democracy is certainly a great obstacle to the dictatorship of the coming Antichrist. It can therefore be counted among that "which restrains". (2 Thessalonians 2:6)<sup>1</sup>.

### 1.3 What is the purpose of the government?

Government is appointed by God and is responsible for law and order. In doing so, it has - in contrast to the Church - not only the right to use words, but also to use physical force, and if necessary, even the death penalty (Genesis 9:5; Romans 13:4). There is no doubt that the sword indicates drastic physical punishment. The state not only has the right, but also the duty to carry this out. It must enforce the law physically, in order to contain lawlessness.

In today's world we would call this sword police (internal) and military (external). Both are there to guarantee all people within their territory can live without fear of violent death.

How does the state know what is wrong? The state is not in contact with God - so how can it know what is evil? We see the answer in Romans 13:5. The things that the state punishes are laws whose transgression provokes *resentment*. This is something a worldly state can do, because a worldly state is also led by people who have a conscience.

To guarantee safety and security, the state or government needs sufficient financial resources. Christians are responsible to pay taxes to the state (Romans 13:6).

Furthermore, the state is also entitled to praise good citizens *verbally* and thus promote good behavior.

### 1.4 What can the government not do?

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<sup>1</sup>The Bible foresees a totalitarian state at the end of time (2 Thessalonians 2:1-4; Revelation 13). This state, although politically totalitarian, is characterized by moral lawlessness. However, this totalitarian lawlessness will become visible before the end of time. The Bible calls this the "mystery of lawlessness". However, the Bible speaks of the fact that there is still someone "who holds" back until such time as he is out of the way. I believe beyond doubt that this is the power which the law of God delights in: the Holy Spirit in the believers. But in 2 Thessalonians 2:6 there is also talk of a neutral thing, that is, of *things* that hold back. These are things which *He*, the Holy Spirit, has shaped. Democracy has historically gained a foothold especially in countries where true Christianity has shaped politics.

There is order and boundaries in God's creation (Psalm 74:17; Psalm 104:9; Acts 17:26). This also refers to the topic "authority". Authority is not unlimited. (See 3.2 Authority). Angels have *exusia* over their realm, people have *exusia* over their sphere, governments, & families - every person - has *exusia* over their body.

If the government had unlimited authority, and everything it did was dictated directly by God, then, first of all, a believer could never disobey the government's command. Secondly, the form of government would never change either. Neither of these points are true.

We have repeated examples in the Bible where people not only righteously opposed government, but were also praised in a special way for doing so (Midwives - Exodus 1:20; Rahab - Joshua 2:3& Hebrews 11:31 Daniel; Apostles).

Furthermore, we also find that governments have been overruled by other people ( for example Babylon by the Medo-Persian Empire). In no way do I intend to plead against obedience to government, but intend to clarify the principle that state authority is not absolute nor unlimited.

If we agree on this point, the follow-up question now arises: What are the limitations of a government's sphere of authority?

Romans 13 gives us an ideal definition. It shows us the ideal state, as God intended it to be. And the definition begins with the principle that the government is not a terror for good works, but for evil.

What does this mean in practical terms? It means that the state has been given the task of judging evil. But the argument does not begin with that. Paul first says that the state is not a terror for good. This is his definition of the state. In fact, it is as if he says, *"If you see someone being a terror for what is good, he has nothing to do with the state of which I speak."* And that is also very easy to understand.

Let's take the following example: You see a police car and suddenly the occupant sticks a gun out of the window and shoots at a crowd. What would you do? Would you say: *Yeah, this is normal. This is government as God intended?*

No, you would immediately try to call a higher authority and tell them that there is someone pretending to have authority (driving a police car) but who lacks it. Why? Why would you be so sure? Simply because that person has become a "terror for good works". By this fact alone you have realized that this person is not the true authority.

However, you may object, *"Well, but that is not what we are seeing today"*. Wait a moment! The point here is simply to show that the state has a limited sphere of authority which it can exceed, but which God then no longer legitimizes.

*"Yes, but at this time Nero was in power and he was persecuting Christians!"* This argument is not exactly in line with Sola Scriptura, because it uses the historical context to interpret the Bible. But if we want to talk about history, we have to do it in the right way. Nero was not yet an evil dictator at the time when the Letter to the Romans was written (56-58 AD). On one occasion, he was required to sign a death warrant

but refused to do so. Ultimately he did sign it, but he was so upset that he exclaimed, "*If only I could not write!*"<sup>2</sup>.

Paul does not argue in Romans 13 that Christians or the Church should submit to the authorities, but that "every soul," that is, every human being, whether with or without Christ, should submit to the authorities appointed by God. He marks out the sphere of competence, but he does not go into what to do when the government steps out of its given authority.

Here perhaps comes the follow-up question: "*Can the state do things that are against God, although it is appointed by God?*" Yes, absolutely. The Bible can help us to understand this:

*The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed — for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. —Acts of the Apostles 4:26-28*

Was it right for the kings to gather against Christ? No. Was it the counsel of God? Yes. The fact that we know the will of God should not prevent us from obeying his direct commandment. We should not use eschatology to no longer be dependent on God on a daily basis. For example, the Lord Jesus also cleaned the temple, even though He knew that this temple would one day be destroyed (Mark 13:2). So the government must not exceed its mandate. It must not become a terror for good works (Romans 13:3) using its sword against good citizens. It must not seek to sit on God's throne and judge what is "good". What is evil is shown by conscience (Romans 13:5). What is good, only God and the Holy Spirit know (Luke 18:19, 1 Corinthians 2:11). The government cannot know this and therefore it should not use psychological or physical violence to enforce what is good, that is, to compel people to be happy.

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<sup>2</sup> Seneca, De Clementia 2,2; Sueton, Nero 10,2.



## 2. What is the Church?

### 2.1 Why does the Church exist?

Most people, when they hear the word "church", they think of a building. And you can't blame them for it. From the 2nd-3rd century onwards, the Church has made building their official place of assembly. But in the Bible, Church is something completely different. Church in the New Testament period was neither a building nor did it have a fixed address.

Ek-klesia (church/congregation) means "the one called out". It was a common name in Greece for an assembly of people.

So who is this gathering of people who were called out? Galatians 1:3-4:

*"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father"*

The Church is a spiritual unity consisting of Jews and Gentiles. It was called out because God wanted to show something in this visible world and in the invisible world (Ephesians 3:8). It is essential to understand that it is an instrument in the hand of God to make Israel jealous (Acts 13:45; Romans 11:11-14). After Israel had rejected its king, the king said: *"Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits."* (Matthew 21:43). This nation, however, was not to be an earthly nation, but a non-nation. As Moses said: *"I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry."* (Romans 10:19).

This means that the Church is not a normal earthly people. It is the body of the Lord (Ephesians 1) here on earth, waiting for heaven, its ultimate destination (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Therefore it is the heavenly part of the kingdom (Hebrews 11:12; John 14:3; Ephesians 1:4, 14, 20, 23; 3:8, 10; Revelation 19:14) which is still on earth. Like a small colony waiting for the Savior (Philippians 3:20). Spiritually we are already in the kingdom (Colossians 1:13) though the kingdom has not yet physically begun here on earth. It will begin when the king arrives.

The Kingdom of God is therefore currently visible in the (temporary) rejection of Israel by the Church of God - not in the political/military sense, but morally. *Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world."* (John 18:36). This suggests that in the future this will be the case. Jesus is already king now (Acts 17:7; 20:25), but still in exile, in heaven. This means that Jesus Christ - even if His royal reign is still to come - is already our Lord now and has total claim over everything in our lives. We are called to put into practice the characteristics of the Kingdom, namely *justice and peace and joy* in the Holy Spirit, both in our personal and in our collective lives (Romans 14:17).

## 2.2 Who is the Church?

**And Jesus came and said to them:**

**“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”**

*–Matthew 28:18*

The Church is the **body of Christ** here on earth. Do you understand what this means? When Saul persecuted the Christians, the Lord said: *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me*. The Church is not a representation of the body - it *is* the body.

As the body of Christ, it is a living entity. It is composed of **all believers** who have been added to this body by the Holy Spirit. This began on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and will continue until the Rapture (Ephesians 1:13; 1 Corinthians 12:13; 2 Thessalonians 2). The Church was conceived in eternity and does not have its vocation here on earth, but in eternity, in the Father's house (John 14).

The head of the Church is Christ (Ephesians 5:23)<sup>3</sup> and as such, He is the savior of His own body. This means that the Church expects salvation of spirit, soul and body from none other but the head.

Christ, as the head of the body, the Church, and as the firstborn from the dead, has supremacy over all other institutions (Colossians 1:17-18)<sup>4</sup>. He has redeemed everything on earth with His blood and therefore He also has the supremacy over earthly institutions. He is the King of kings (1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 17:14; 19:16).

As the head, Christ has a much closer relationship with his body than He has with any government body. Through the Holy Spirit, the Church has a much better capacity of discernment (1 Corinthians 6:1). The Church has an internal jurisdiction to judge and separate itself from spiritual evil. But the Church cannot judge outside of its sphere (1 Corinthians 5). Jesus Christ leads the Church locally through the elders, whom he sets as overseers by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28).

## 2.3 What is the purpose of the Church?

The Church is the body of Christ here on earth. As the Acts of the Apostles brilliantly shows us, the Church is a continuation of the ministry of the Lord Jesus here on earth. We as the Church are the hands and feet of Christ. And a major task is that we as the Church of God are the pillar and the foundation of truth (2 Timothy 3). In the Church, the world can practically (or superficially) recognize what the truth of God is (though not fully, as Christians can make mistakes – God can't). The Church is *“a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for possession, to proclaim the virtues of Him who calls out of*

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<sup>3</sup> *For the husband is the head of the wife, as the Christ is the head of the assembly; he is the Savior of the body* (Ephesians 5:23).

<sup>4</sup> *And he is the head of the body, the assembly, which is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he may have precedence in everything* (Colossians 1:18).

*darkness to His wonderful light"* (1 Peter 2:9). This includes Bible teaching, fellowship, the Lord's Supper, prayers and evangelism (Acts 2:42).

## 2.4 What can the Church not do?

In comparison to Israel, which has an earthly/political orientation, the Church has a heavenly destiny. Hence we do not see in any verse of the Bible that the Church is called to be **politically active**. This may be the case with individual Christians under personal responsibility, but under no circumstances can the Church as a body be politically active.

In fact, the exact opposite is called for. Peter should leave his sword in its sheath (Matthew 26:52)<sup>5</sup> and Christians in Rome are commanded not to rise up against social and political injustice (Romans 12:17-21)<sup>6</sup>.

The monopoly on the use of force thus clearly lies in the hands of the government, and the Church must never raise the sword to enforce its goals. It would also be completely irrational to enforce spiritual goals by material means (Ephesians 6:12)<sup>7</sup>.

## 3. In Practice

### 3.1 Identity

Government measures given to be applied by the Church (for example, seating arrangements, procedures, singing, masks, greetings, etc.), cannot be tossed aside as neutral. Even a trivial thing like a tax, *charged once a year*, was considered a reason for Jesus Christ to have a profound and fundamental discussion with **Peter** about identity (see exegesis below). Although Jesus paid the **tax**, in hindsight, for strategic reasons, it was important for Him that Peter understood precisely how He assessed the situation. How else could Peter understand the Lord's radical measure when He overturned tables in the temple?

Even if congregations today implement timely measures for strategic reasons, it is essential that we are aware of who we are and what the **position of the Church of Christ** is in the world today. Because, as the body of Christ, we do not have a neutral position. What we do automatically affects the Lord Jesus.

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<sup>5</sup> *Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. (Matthew 26:52).*

<sup>6</sup> *Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it[a] to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:17-21).*

<sup>7</sup> *For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12).*

What we do either brings honor or dishonor to His name, and represents Him in either a right or wrong way.

### 3.2 Authority

In the Bible, authority is called *exusia*. It denotes the power of authority (influence) or law (privilege). It is the moral right of a person to tell another person what to do or not to do (Matthew 8:9 - see Romans 13:1). A distinction must be made between legitimate power of command (for example: parents) and an illegitimate appropriation of power (for example: a kidnapping).

*Exusia* is not unlimited, but has limits provided by God and should not be accepted without reflection. We see this, for example, in the life of the Lord Jesus (John 19:11) and in the ministry of the apostle Paul (Acts 17:11).

The overseers have no *exusia* per se, that is, they have no authority in themselves. Christ is the head and he has *exusia* (Matthew 7:29; 9:6; 28:18). The Elders can lose their office if they do not meet the qualities required by 1 Timothy 3. The government also has a delegated authority and therefore can also lose this *exusia*, as the history of the peoples of Canaan or even Israel shows. When Israel expelled the peoples of Canaan, it did so with the authority of God. The *exusia* over Canaan had been given to Israel. The words *Mene, mene, tekel upharsin* addressed to Belshazzar were a declaration by God that the *exusia* had been taken away from him, and given to the Medes and Persians (Daniel 5:28).

The authority of government today, plainly lies in the fact that God has withdrawn this supremacy from Israel, and at present, in his *absence*, has given it to the nations. The authority of the Church, on the other hand, lies in the spiritual *presence* of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 18:20) and His position as the head of the Church (Ephesians 1:22, 5:23; Colossians 1:18).

The government judges in the *material* realm what is evil, and judges it with the sword (Romans 13:4). The Church judges in the *spiritual* realm what is evil, and binds or loosens (Matthew 18:18; 1 Corinthians 5).

However, the judgment of the Church is much more precise and of higher quality than the judgment of the government, because it is directly connected to the Head through the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:1). That the spiritual (heavenly) is above the earthly is also evident in the order of creation (heaven and earth) and in several biblical examples (Jacob blessed Pharaoh, Samuel ordained David; Jesus before Pilate).

*Further examples of Exusia:*

Sonship of God - the right to become children of God<sup>8</sup>

Private property - Applicable to those who own private property<sup>9</sup>

Head covering - a sign of submission<sup>10</sup>

Food - the right to eat<sup>11</sup>

Marriage - the right to marry a virtuous woman<sup>12</sup>

Spiritual ministry - Paul speaks in the singular<sup>13</sup> and plural<sup>14</sup>

### 3.3 Interference

The big question we have to ask ourselves is: Is there government interference in the Church and is this interference legitimate?

By interference I mean an interference into a different party's authority, an external influence. For example, since creation, God has given the family as an entity in which people should socialize (body & soul). Parents (Ephesians 6:1; Colossians 3:20) are given the authority by God to educate and discipline children. The father bears the primary responsibility (1 Timothy 3:4). The parents stand before God and will one day have to account for this. Interference in this case would mean, for example, that the Church or the government interfered in the upbringing of the children.

Neither the Church nor the government will ever be held accountable by God for the education of children.

To illustrate this practically, let's look at an example:

Imagine that Rainer has a family of three children. Stefan, who is in no way related to Rainer, makes a website stating that from tomorrow on, Rainer's family will be obliged to wear pink sweaters (because the color pink is calming and Rainer's children are hyperactive). Early the next morning Rainer comes to the breakfast table and finds his whole family sitting there in pink sweaters. What will he say? He'll probably want to find out how this synchronisation came about. Then he will send everyone to their room to change, and he'll call Stefan to explain what the "head of the family" concept is and how it works. Why? Because this is an illegitimate interference. Stefan does not have the *exusia* to order Rainer's children.

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<sup>8</sup> *But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right (exusia) to become children of God. (John 1:12).*

<sup>9</sup> *While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own (exusia)? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? (Acts 5:4)*

<sup>10</sup> *That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. (1 Corinthians 11:10).*

<sup>11</sup> *Do we not have the right (exusia) to eat and drink? (1 Corinthians 9:4)*

<sup>12</sup> *Do we not have the right (exusia) to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? (1 Corinthians 9:5)*

<sup>13</sup> *...I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority (exusia) that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down. (2 Corinthians 13:10).*

<sup>14</sup> *For even if I boast a little too much of our authority (exusia), which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed. (2 Corinthians 10:8).*

Now let's imagine that Franz, the oldest of Rainer's family, while hanging out with his buddies, broke into a house and got caught. He is put on trial and is fined. This is legitimate interference. Why? Because Franz is not only a family member, but also a citizen of the state. And the state has the duty and the *exusia* to punish evil.

We must therefore ask ourselves the question of whether we currently see an interference of the state in the affairs of the Church of God. If the state declares specific measures for the Church on a website and these are implemented without further ado within the congregations, without prayer or instructions from the elders, then this is definitely interference. Jesus Christ, the head, was not consulted, but the state took direct action in Church life<sup>15</sup>. Therefore I would again like to refer particularly to Matthew 17.

First, Peter answered the officer *directly*, without prior consultation with his Lord. Are we guilty of this? Secondly, Peter, by his behavior, acted as if Jesus Christ ought to submit to this tax. Must the Church of Jesus Christ submit to the instructions of the state, which clearly exceed its jurisdiction and enter the territory of the Lord? Is the state allowed to command the body of Christ?

An example: Is the government allowed to impose fire safety regulations on a church? The answer is very simple: The government cannot. Why? Because the Church is not a building. The Church does not even have an address. The Church is heavenly.

The fact that churches started gathering in buildings is a result of the fusion of the state and Church in the 3rd century. The early Church gathered in houses (the upper room was a temporary solution). The temple was also used for this transitional period, in order to pass on the new teachings about the Church to the believing Jews. Afterwards, however, the congregation withdrew into private homes.

The place of the Church meeting is not critical and may also change, but, unfortunately, the purchase of meeting buildings has led to the confusion of the church building with the Church. If you would have asked a person in the first century about the *church/Ekklesia*, he would have said that it is a group of people who believe that Jesus Christ is the Messiah. If you ask someone today about the Church, they will show you a building.

Maybe this corona crisis is God's way of correcting this deviation?

Follow-up question: Is the government allowed (from a biblical perspective) to require private homes to comply with certain fire safety regulations? No. The state may not force anyone to do so (sword), but on the other hand, it may praise those who follow these rules (e.g. tax relief) and thereby achieve its desired result. This is a gray area, which is not that important for Christians anyway, because the Lord Jesus' example shows that we should not fight the government for such things.

These were technical examples until now. Let's take a moral example: one person kills another person (murder). Should the elders carry out the sentence or the state? In this case, the elders will have to determine the facts of the case, but they will not have the sword to prosecute the person. They will have

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<sup>15</sup> Are we going to deny that this was the case? Were there not external things which were proposed year after years to the Church, and rejected over and over again? And then comes COVID and suddenly everything changes (seating arrangements, procedure, the breaking of bread, name register, leadership, etc....). Is this the work of the Holy Spirit?

to turn the person over to the state. Just as the Jews had to hand Jesus over to Pilate. They did not have the authority (*Exusia*) to kill Jesus. However, Pilate was not interested in judging Jesus Christ for any religious issues either. He realized that this was outside his realm.

The great trick the devil is using in our time is that he is using material things, but they clearly have a spiritual influence. We can see quite clearly from Matthew 17 that paying taxes was already an important identity question for our Lord Jesus Christ.

Even the wise Gamaliel knew about the explosive nature of interference. Commentators often revolve around verse 29: *One must obey God more than man*. However, it is interesting to see what is discussed in the Synedrium following this statement - namely on the side of authority. Gamaliel stands up and says: *"So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!"* So they took his advice... (Acts 5:38-39).

So he reminds his contemporaries that they could be abusing their authority and interfering in the realm of God. He certainly does not assume that authority is unlimited, rather that authority is always blessed by God.

### 3.4 Little Things

In a time of great turmoil and conflict of conscience, we should be very careful not to ridicule other Christians and portray them as petty. As I said, the Lord Jesus was "petty" about a small temple tax. The argument that "these things are minor", that it is rather childish to get upset about them, is certainly misplaced. We know from day-to-day life that small actions can have great significance. Kneeling before a memorial, a derogatory gesture in the classroom, a pejorative word at the family table. It is not about the "size" of the action, but about the truth/teaching behind it, and what is therefore underlined by this gesture.

### 3.5 Herodians, Publicans and Zealots

There are currently six different ways of dealing with the state or government.

1. We must obey everything the state says and I will coerce my brothers and sisters to do the same. (Publican)
2. We must obey everything the government says. (Herodians)
3. We must obey everything the government says, *except* when it goes against an explicit command of the Lord. (Legalistic obedience)
4. We must obey the government whenever it corresponds to its area of competence and does not interfere with other divine areas of authority. (Spiritual obedience)

5. We don't need to obey the government when it steps out of its sphere of competence.
6. We must actively oppose the government. (Zealots)

Those who have followed my exposition carefully will understand that I plead for spiritual obedience (option 4).

Now I would like to address an explicit word to those behaving like "Publicans". But before I do so, I want to avoid confusion. These should not be confused with elders who, even before Corona, exercised this ministry on the basis of the Word of God and who, with prayer, follow certain guidelines for medical and moral reasons!

I am talking about people who, since the Corona crisis, have assumed an illegitimate predominance within local churches and dictate rules of conduct to their brothers and sisters simply because they have read these rules on a website somewhere. They do not measure themselves against 1 Timothy 3, but have their authority from the state and a "common sense" - not from the Holy Spirit and the Bible.

Consider this: you are binding the consciences of your fellow brothers and sisters on the basis of a superficial interpretation of Romans 13 and forcing them to do things that the Lord may *not* demand. You will be held accountable before the Lord.

The same applies to the Zealots: The apostle Paul (and the other apostles) spoke quite clearly about *submission*. It is noble for a Christian to shine in civil life through obedience. Whoever takes the sword will perish by the sword!

### 3.6 Love your neighbor

Appealing to love is always the right thing to do. But it must be clear to us that through this argument very ungodly things have been legitimized. We will only find the right balance if we see the first and second commandments as belonging together. If the call for love of neighbor should undermine the sovereignty of God, then no real love is revealed, but simply a false argument to satisfy our thirst for legalism. One can very well love their neighbor, protect their neighbor, *without* giving the state control over the Church.

*Why does it matter if you wear a pitiful mask or sign your name on a list? Look at what Christians in other countries must suffer for their faith!*<sup>16</sup>

This argument sounds good, but it is wrong. Many people who are against the mask or the attendance list have spent hours distributing flyers in ice-cold markets or have opened their homes for the needy. It is not a question of comfort - it is about identity.

However, we must not lose sight of Romans 14. How can I worship the Lord of love when an elderly sister sitting next to me is worried about her health and would rather see me wearing a mask?

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<sup>16</sup> Is it interesting that persecuted Christians are used as comparative material? Isn't there a silent consent that the mask is already a matter of persecution?



At the same time, we must not allow the weak to rule through fear or tyranny. The role of the elders is to instruct the weak and thus make them strong in faith and knowledge.

### 3.7 Spiritual obedience

#### 1. We must obey the government...

The rule for Christians and citizens of the kingdom is to obey. Obedience is to Christians as water is to fish. Obedience is what we will expect from angels in the coming world, and therefore we should not and cannot live in disobedience here. We should obey the government without murmuring. But in a democracy, obedience also means to help the government and to report possible grievances. Inevitably, democracy also includes dialogue. So if we want to obey the state, it means that we recognize it and treat it as it has dictated. If we behave as if we were in a monarchy and simply follow like sheep, then we have not understood democracy nor are we obeying the authorities.

#### 2. ...*whenever* it corresponds to its area of competence...

We need to be aware of what areas of competence the Bible identifies. Should the government exceed its area of competence, this does not mean that we do not have to obey. However, we should be aware of what the Bible says and where the boundaries are blurred.

#### 3. ...and does not interfere with other divine areas of authority.

Our obedience should never stop. Christians are not rebels. But there is a moment when a greater authority compels the Christian not to obey the established authorities in order not to be guilty of disobeying the higher authority.

### 3.8 Conscience

Conscience is one of the most important components of man (1 Timothy 1:5,19; Acts 24:16). It is an integrated alarm system, which alerts man when he violates the elementary aspects of the fear of the Lord. This means: When he violates God's basic law (stealing, lying, murder, etc.).

To act against one's conscience is ultimately fatal, both for the unbeliever and the Christian. Of course, the Christian has a much more sensitive conscience through the continual reading of the Word of God.

The Corona crisis presents Christians with a great dilemma. Namely that there are serious Christians who have conscience issues with option A, while others have conscience issues with option B. To impose a solution on either one or the other would be a sin according to Romans 14:23.

What is the biblical way?

To achieve unity, "right knowledge" is the only way.

Why?

Conscience means: with knowledge. It comes from Latin: *conscientia*. *Con* means *with* and *scientia* means *knowledge or knowing*. So conscience means: *with knowledge*. Hence my conscience is sharpened by *knowledge*. I know what the standard is and I also know what the reality is, whether or not it agrees with this standard.

For example, if I know I should not steal, then this is the standard/rule. But if I go ahead and actually steal something, my conscience tells me that my actions do not conform to the standard. And this non-conformity creates tension. *We call it having a guilty conscience.*

So in order to create unity, the Word of God (as the authoritative knowledge base) must become central again. We must "go back to the Word" and know what the Word of God says about the Church and the state. But there is another step to be taken. The Church must also address the reality of the outside world. In the Corona crisis, different realities are offered by the media world. The elders of a local Church have to deal with them intensively and try to assess them under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Only when both components are seen by the church in the same way, can the situation return to stability. Any refusal to talk is a showcase of lack of love, and not opening the Bible is a disdain for the Word of God. There will be remorse on both sides, which will lead to very radical actions, even separation and betrayal/persecution (John 16:1-3).

## 4. Bible Exegesis

### 4.1 Romans 13

Paul spoke about justification and sanctification in **chapters 1-8**.

In chapters 9-11 he spoke about Israel's current rejection. This is very important because the governments today are transitional governments until King Jesus enters His kingdom.

In chapter 12 the apostle speaks about practical life in the body of Christ. Although he does not say it directly, it immediately resonates that we are spiritually connected with the head. The paragraph ends with the idea that presently we should not settle injustice with physical violence. We should not - figuratively speaking - raise the sword, because Christ will do that. He will do so to the fullest extent when He comes into His kingdom. But now, of course, the logical question arises: *How does God stop evil in this day and age?*

With the government! On the one hand, he says that the government is a protection and on the other hand he admonishes subordination, because his previous teachings could give the impression that the Christian has nothing to do with this world and therefore does not have to be subject to the government anymore.

The Roman community consisted mainly of non-Jews, though it also had Jewish community members. The Jews were generally quite rebellious. For many, Genesis 17:15 applied, meaning that it was a sin to recognize a non-Jewish ruler. It was the spirit of the Zealots that influenced them.

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📖 V.1 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

### **Soul (psyche)**

This word shows that all men are to submit to the authorities. It is not a question here of Christian or non-Christian. The soul here simply indicates the complete natural man. It is extremely important to understand what Paul is talking about. He is not talking about how Christians should behave towards the state and even less about the relationship between the Church and the state. This is not the point of view of the Epistle to the Romans at all. Paul is talking about an ideal *government*. He shows how God is currently judging evil, and, according to chapter 12, Christians are *not* called to lift the sword against civil evil.

He also does not speak of the Spirit. For the Spirit is under the complete influence and control of the Holy Spirit. It is the link that we have to the head of the body. Governments must not intervene in this relationship in any way.

### **No authority, except from God**

This is the core statement that must be understood in order to understand the rest, and also to live it out properly. Judgment and authority were in God's hands before the Flood (Genesis 4:15). After the Flood, God institutionalized the principle of jurisdiction and set authority through man in order to limit the expansion of evil. *"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image."* (Genesis 9:6).

### **Authority (exusia)**

Authority (exusia) is the moral right of a person to tell another person what to do or not to do. We see this in Matthew 8: *For I too am a man under authority (exusia), with soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my servant, [a] 'Do this,' and he does it."* (Matthew 8:9)

Authority comes from above. The commander is first of all "a man under authority" and therefore he can command. To show what this means for the civilian sector, let us take the example of a theft:

A thief steals Jessica's wallet. Does Jessica have authority to tell this person: *"Give me my wallet back!*" The answer is clearly yes. Why? Because Jessica is under God and private property is a right from God. Jessica is the caretaker of this property. It's her moral right to reclaim her wallet. Is she allowed to use the sword? No. It belongs to the state. (Is a simple grab and pull on the wallet = the sword? - I think not).

To take another example from family life:

A father sees two of his children arguing. Does he have the right to go to them and say: *Stop!* and then bring them to reconciliation? Absolutely. God has given the father - the parents - this authority (Proverbs 1:8; Ephesians 6:2). The father has *exusia*. It is real. It exists.

To give a negative example, let us take the example of a kidnapping:

Someone takes possession of another person to achieve selfish goals. Does he have God-given *exusia* over this person? Absolutely not. He is a thief and a violator of the law. God does not approve of this balance of power, ultimately punishing the criminal by the sword.

So there are illegitimate power relationships that can be appropriated without God's consent. But this is not *exusia* according to the Word of God, but rather an illegitimate emotional or physical violence. So *exusia* is not to be confused with illegitimate appropriation of power.

*Exusia* is also not unlimited and should not be accepted without reflection. We see this in the life of the Lord Jesus, for example:

#### **[EXCURSE] - Jesus before Pilate (John 19:11)**

*Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."*

It is important to understand what Jesus Christ says to Pilate. Some interpret these words as follows: *Indeed, Pilate, you may condemn me because you have been given the authority of God to do so. I submit myself to you.*

But the situation is completely different. Pilate asks Jesus: Where are you from?

This is a question about his identity. It is the same question the Pharisees asked and it is a spiritual question. He does not want to know whether He comes from Galilee or not, but whether He is the Son of God. And in this domain Pilate has no authority. Only shortly before, Pilate had failed to comply with his God-given authority, and released a violent criminal instead of a person he knew was innocent. Pilate does not have the authority from God to decide whether Jesus Christ is really the Son of God nor whether He is worthy of punishment. Pilate is simply to judge whether Jesus Christ did anything against civil law. Jesus Christ makes this clear by making the judicial process more difficult. He does not answer Pilate's questions. And this irritates Pilate to the point where he starts acting out and thinking he has absolute power to let Jesus go or to condemn Him to death. And at that moment Jesus Christ speaks with absolute clarity, not to assure Pilate that he is right, but exactly the opposite.

What Jesus Christ really says is:

*Pilate - you overestimate yourself. You believe that you have authority over me, that you can use the sword unchallenged against good. But you are wrong. You only have authority because it has been given to you. That means that it is delegated and limited. You are allowed to pronounce judgment here today because, first of all, God has allowed you not to be slain by Him and be eaten up by worms like Herod (Pilate later died a violent death). Secondly, because God has given Rome the reign and you are an emissary. The violence comes "from above" (Pilate probably thought he was talking about Rome). So you are subject to the superior laws and above all, you are responsible to the laws of God. But as a pagan, you don't know this dear Pilate, and therefore the one who handed me over is more guilty than you.*

This was primarily Judas, who knew the Lord as a friend and thus possessed the highest personal knowledge about Him, and secondly Caiaphas, who knew the laws of God inside out and knew that Jesus *had come from God* (John 3:2).

Jesus does not, therefore, grant Pilate unchallenged authority, but rather denies it to him. And shows Pilate that a far greater one stands over him. Moreover, the Lord shows him that he is moving into a sphere of authority where he would be better not. Instead, he should humble himself. God humbles him by speaking to his wife and not to him. She is wiser than him. But there is more! Pilate realizes that the words spoken by the heavenly king who stood before him tore him apart inwardly to such an extent that he did not even have time to pronounce judgment. Pilate, who was so "powerful", is suddenly no longer strong. Simply because he has risen above his limits and must realize that in this sphere, he has no power of command.

CONCLUSION: Jesus does not say, *"Yes, Pilate, you may condemn me because you have been given the authority of God to do so. I submit myself to you.*

But rather: *Pilate, you have no authority to do what you do. You will stand before God one day for this. I resist you passively (silence) and not actively (struggle), because my day has not yet come. Consider yourself fortunate, Pilate. Poor Judas and Caiaphas.*

This means that to cite John 19 as an argument that the state has undisputed power to give commands and that we as Christians should *blindly* obey is a misinterpretation of the text, which claims the exact opposite. The text says that the state is *bound* to keep to its domain, that is, to use the sword only against evil (Barabbas) and not against good. If it does not do this and abuses power, the Christian may use words (not the sword) to point this out to the state. But the

Christian must *not* obey the state in excessive confidence when it comes to the affairs of God (silence).

Now what is the God-given domain of government?

Romans 13 is actually the answer. However, another excursus can give us an illustration of this:

**[EXCURSE] - Jesus and the tax coin (Luke 20,20-26)**

*So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor. So they asked him, "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?" But he perceived their craftiness, and said to them, "Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?" They said, "Caesar's." He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent.*

The denarius was the most important silver coin of ancient Rome for almost 500 years.

From 44 B.C. onwards, the laurel portrait of the emperor or his relatives was usually depicted on the front of the denarius. The reverse side showed figures of gods, personifications of abstract terms (such as Felicitas, Fortuna, Fortuna redux, Hilaritas, Libertas, Securitas, Fecunditas, Pudicitia, etc.), defeated countries or anniversaries, etc.


What does Jesus Christ say about the duties and limits of the believer towards the state?

**The duty:** *Give to Caesar what is Caesar's:* Jesus Christ acknowledged that the Roman state had the right to this coin, namely taxes. (for further details see Matthew 17). Perhaps we will also find a hidden reference to legitimize the sword of the state, because that was also on the coins.

**The limit:** *Give to God what is God's:* So there are things that only God is entitled to. These are spiritual, immaterial, heavenly things. These are the things of the heart, and the state or government cannot decide on them. When the State intervenes in religious things (see the figures of the gods on the coin), it exceeds its competence. The state may therefore reach into our wallets, but not into our hearts. The

basic principle in dealing with human authorities is: *One must obey God more than humans (Acts 5:29)*. A nice example of this is Daniel's friends in Daniel 3 and especially Daniel himself in chapter 6. See also Exodus 1:17.

Back to Romans 13:1.

 *V1 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.*

**Governing Authorities:** They are above (*hyper*) you (1 Timothy 2:2). What submission looks like, we see in Nehemiah 1:11; 2:3 and Daniel 6:21.

**Those that exist have been instituted by God:** The Lord Jesus confirms this when he stands before Pilate (John 19:11). When the leadership of Israel was transferred to the nations, it was a Jew (Daniel) who instructed the king on this principle of God-given authority. Daniel 4:22 *"...it is you, O king, who have grown and become strong. Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the ends of the earth."*

**Be subject (hypotassō):** In Greek, the verb is in the "present-imperative" tense. This means the command to perform an action which has a direct effect on yourself. Thus it could also be translated as "Allow every day that the authorities have power over you". Jesus under God is the model for this (1 Corinthians 15:28).


Exactly the same subordination is also demanded with regard to:



- the working world (1 Peter 2:18),
- the elders in the Church (1 Peter 5:5).

Is this submission absolute? Not at all. We know from the Bible and from the life of the apostle that firstly, he partly used his civil right strategically (Acts 16:37) and secondly, he partly openly admitted civil disobedience (Acts 5).


Thus, Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 are not *exhaustive* (the entire rule), but the general rule from which there can be deviations. These passages do not tell us what these deviations are. It is not the intention. The intention is to call for obedience.

 *V2 Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.*

**Resist the authorities:** Rebellion is like smoke to the Christian's eyes. Why? Because rebellion comes from the devil (Isaiah 14:12-15; Judas 6-11). Even if Christians have to obey God more than men, this is not rebellion, but submission to a higher authority, God's authority.

One example is the passive resistance of the Lord Jesus against Pilate. Jesus did not answer Pilate. He did not owe it to him (*exusia*). But when the oath came from the high priest (Matthew 26:63), Jesus had to answer<sup>17</sup>, for he was born under law (Galatians 4:4). The oath of the demon on the other hand (Mark 5:7: *I adjure you by God, do not torment me*) had no *exusia* and was accordingly not obeyed by the Lord Jesus.

He did not let others determine his service. Jesus calls Herod a fox (Luke 13:32).

 *V3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval;*

**A terror to good conduct:** Some people read this verse this way: *Unfortunately, governments can also be a terror to good works*. No! Paul does not speak about this. Paul sees the government in its ideal state. If the government becomes a terror for good works, then it does not have the authority of God in this area. Or is God a supporter of evil?

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<sup>17</sup> *If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify, and though he is a witness, whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity...* (Leviticus 5:1).

📖 V4 *for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.*

**Sword:** The sword is for death (Psalm 7:13-14). In principle, this is about the death penalty. The Bible sees, in the ideal case, a "small government" and not an exhaustive state organization, as we know it today in Western countries.

📖 V5 *Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.*

**Conscience:** As I said, this passage is not only about Christians. It is about every soul (V1). Therefore this verse does not say: *As Christians we ought to have a much higher and nobler motivation than the normal man* - this is true, but it is not the argument. The argument is: every man shall obey, firstly in fear of punishment and secondly because of conscience. Paul anticipates people thinking that a person could do something worthy of punishment, but get away with it. He says that one should still obey, or else his conscience "will be killed". This gives us a clue as to what Paul is aiming at here: It is about serious negligence of moral life, which the government should punish. These are offences which any normal functioning conscience would mark as evil. Lying, theft, murder, etc.

📖 V7 *Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.*


**What is owed to them:** It does not say here to give someone something that does *not* belong to him.

**Taxes... Revenue:** This tax (phoros) was a kind of income and wealth tax paid by individuals to their foreign ruler. Tolls (telos) were a kind of duty on goods paid directly to Roman governors or procurators or to their vassals, such as King Herod.

**Respect... Honor:** Fear here is to be borne by every soul towards the government. Honor is a subordinate form of fear - like tolls and taxes. However, the Christian no longer owes this fear to the government because he fears God and thus separates himself from evil through the Holy Spirit. This is why Peter also says in his first letter (1 Peter 2:17)<sup>18</sup>, that we should fear God and honor the king.

This verse shows us two things: First, that the fear of God and reverence are two different things. Second, that Paul is speaking here about people (psyche) in general, because he calls for fear to govern, which is only necessary when we do evil. But a Christian does not actually do evil anymore (at least not to the extent that it has to come to the sword). It would be a great pity if a father had to punish his child by a secular judge.

## 4.2 Matthew 17

 V24 *When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax went up to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?"*

**Double drachmas:** This event is recounted by Matthew alone. As a customs officer he was certainly very interested in how Jesus dealt with the subject of taxes. It had been his profession.

All Jews over 20 years old had to pay a tax for the maintenance of the temple in Jerusalem. This tax was collected annually. One drachma corresponded approximately to one denarius, a daily wage for a worker (Matthew 20:2). For the average wage earner, this two-drachma tax equalled the salary of two days.

This tax was a religious tax, while in Matthew 22:15-22 a *secular* tax is the focus. L. Morris writes:

*"The impost was based on the provision that each man should pay a half shekel for the upkeep of the tabernacle in the wilderness (Exod. 30:11-10, though the tax itself was of much more recent origin. It was paid by Jews outside Palestine as well as those in the holy land, and provided a significant part of the revenue that kept the temple going with all its functions. So important was it that the Mishnah devotes a whole tractate to it (Sheilalim). From it we learn that pledges for the tax might be exacted from "levites, Israelites, proselytes, and freed slaves, but*

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<sup>18</sup> *Give honor to all; love the brotherhood; fear God; honor the king.*

*not from women, slaves, or minors" (1:3). Priests did not pay it (1:4); Gentiles or Samaritans were not allowed to pay it (1:5)."*<sup>19</sup>

**Does your teacher not pay the tax:** The question of the collector indicates that Jesus had a reputation for not meeting society's expectations. It looked like a simple question, but it could easily have caused a big fire. The tax collectors were certainly not educated people or theologians and therefore a negative answer could have led to Jerusalem being called in. This could have escalated into a lengthy dispute. Jesus had no problem offending people if it was the will of the Father and the cause justified it (see Matthew 15:12-14,23). But here it was not the will of the Father.

Pragmatically speaking, Jesus lived on donations (Luke 8:3) and could certainly have been excused, since, for example, priests and others who were exclusively in the service of God were also entitled to tax exemption.

**To Peter:** Probably because Peter was the leader of the troop, but not as eloquent as Jesus and sometimes acted rashly.

 *V25 He said, "Yes." And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?"*

**He said, "Yes.":** With his answer, Peter wants to immediately eliminate any suspicion of the contrary. Effectively he says: "But, of course - my master will definitely pay". Peter answers before he has spoken to his Lord Jesus about this subject.

**Toll or Tax-tolls** [τέλη] are tariffs on exported or imported goods - and tax [κῆνσον] (from the Latin word census) means the census tax, which was to be paid to Rome by everyone whose name was in the "census". So this is a civil tax.

**From whom do kings of the earth take:** Jesus takes an example from the secular world - the political world - and asks Peter a metaphorical question. Why Jesus takes an example from the non-religious world may have something to do with the overall historical situation, as M. Green writes:


*"The situation was not merely contemporary but prophetic. For after ad 70, when the temple had been razed to the ground, the Romans reassigned the temple tax to the upkeep of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome. This infuriated the Jews, and after repeated complaints it was*

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<sup>19</sup> Morris, L. (1992). The Gospel according to Matthew (p. 452). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

*revoked under the Emperor Nerva in ad 96. But when Matthew was writing, perhaps early in the 80s, the temple tax, reassigned to Rome, was an exceedingly contentious issue. Men would sometimes be stripped in the streets to see if they were circumcised and therefore liable to the tax! Christians saw themselves as distinct from Judaism: they were no longer the servants of the Lord, but his sons. They felt they had no need to contribute towards the Jewish temple, still less its Roman replacement! But lest their refusal to pay should set a bad example to others and spark off a major confrontation with the Roman authorities, which would do great harm to the cause of the gospel, let them go the extra mile and pay the tax. Had not Jesus done the same?<sup>20</sup>*

**Sons:** It shows that kings do not demand taxes from their sons, but from their subjects. Jesus, as the Son of God, is greater than the temple and therefore he does not have to pay the temple tax (Matthew 12:6; 21:12-13). The plural includes the disciples with "sons", since they too are the sons of God, their heavenly Father (5,9.45; 6,9.26), but in a different relationship (see V27, where it refers to me and you).

 V26 *And when he said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free.*

**Then the sons are free:** What he says is "*If the king's sons are exempt from taxes, then you know why I do not have to pay taxes,*" or "*This is a tax for the maintenance of my father's house. As his son, this tax is not for me - I am free.*"

That is the moral of this whole incident. Jesus will pay the tax afterwards. But you might ask yourself: Why then all this discussion? Why the questioning? The answer is that Jesus Christ wanted to talk with Peter about the issue of identity. He wanted to make it clear to Peter who He is and that, as a son, He is actually not obliged to pay the temple tax.

This is also a very important lesson for us Christians. Our position is in Christ. And in Christ the whole world belongs to us.<sup>21</sup> However, there are certain areas of power in this world that God has still given to the government. We have to accept these, though we must not overload them and let them impose things which are outside their area of power.

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<sup>20</sup> Green, M. (2001). *The message of Matthew: the kingdom of heaven* (pp. 188–189). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>21</sup> *1 Corinthians 3:21-23: So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.*

📖 V27 *However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself."*

**Fish:** Again, this is about the claim to power, and this time Jesus uses the field which Peter knew so well. Jesus shows His omnipotence over nature here. He shows Peter that He, as the last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45) and as the Creator-God, has the total claim to power over all things. That which Adam did not do (Genesis 1:26; Psalm 8:6-8), namely to subject the world to himself, the man Jesus did (Hebrews 2:6).

We also see this dominion of the Lord Jesus on earth with other animals (Mark 1:13, Matthew 21:1-7; 26:34; 74-75).

**Shekel:** The irony of the story is that the sons can pay the tax because the Son of God gives them the money to do so.

**Conclusion of the fish story:** paying taxes was not a neutral thing for Jesus Christ. But it is Peter's attitude which Jesus Christ must rectify here. Jesus sees that his identity is being attacked. He makes clear what a high position he, and therefore Peter, have. He does not have to pay the tax. Afterwards, for strategic reasons, He submits to this human order, because He is thus also subservient to God. This small thing is not worth giving an insult and thus endangering his great mission. But when it comes to the temple, he radically took His stand: drove out all those who were buying and selling – overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves.

**Fear God. Honor the emperor.**

*1 Peter 2:17*