



Paul's Reconstruction of Theology: Romans 9-14 in Context*

VÍTOR WESTHELLE

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

In chapters one through eight of Paul's letter to the Romans we have the development of a theological argument on the relationship between law and grace. So central has this portion of Scripture been that some have suggested that even if the rest of the Bible had been lost we would still have the cornerstone of Christian doctrine. Paul starts his epistle heralding the battle cry of his theology: "He who through faith is righteous shall live" (Rom 1:17; cf. Hab 2:4). From this starting point through chapter eight we have a sophisticated theological argument which provides the warrants for that statement. In his conclusion Paul asserts peremptorily: "There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death" (8:1-2). Chapter 8 finally culminates with these words: "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:38-39).

The reader who has followed Paul so far should wonder why there are more chapters in this letter. It seems that nothing is left to be said. And yet the letter continues. What follows is not an appendix, nor is it an epilogue. Romans 1-8 aims at answering the question, "What does it mean to be justified and what difference does it make?" The answer given is the assertion that in Christ we are reconciled with God so that we "might walk in newness of life" (6:4).

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Now Paul is faced with two quite obvious but nonetheless embarrassing problems for one who had just finished writing one of the most eloquent expositions of the benefits, the uncompromising radicality, the newness and distinctiveness of the Christian faith. The first problem, prompted by a fact recently made evident that the mission to the Jews had failed, presents this question: "What does it mean that the majority of Israel has rejected Jesus as the Messiah?" This question assumes a greater significance than the failure of a particular missiological effort might suggest. Those who were rejecting the gospel are precisely those to whom "belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises" (9:4). And furthermore, "to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to

the flesh, is the Christ” (9:5). Due to this fact, it was assumed that the order in which the gospel would spread itself over the world was that first the Jews and then the gentiles would receive it. The subversion of this order puts into question not only the primacy of the Jews but raises doubts about the election itself. Has God changed the rules of the game in the middle of it? Has God turned the tables, revoked the promises, rescinded the covenant and alienated the chosen nation (11:1)? Can God be trusted? These questions cast shadows of suspicion on Paul’s doctrine of grace, for the Jews were supposed to be the first to rejoice in it, but clearly, in reality, they were not. For most Jews Paul’s doctrine of grace operated within an economy too alien and unfair to be appropriated.

A second question, arising from within the community of faith, grows out of another problem. Paul’s emphasis on the radical newness of freedom that grace brings about did not provide sufficient provisos to restrain charismatic expressions of enthusiasm that led to an indifference to or wrong appreciation of the values of community organization, civil society, worldly vocations, and cultural mores. The question then is: If Christians “walk in newness of life,” why should they be bound to earthly institutions that represent the old? Why should they stain themselves by participating in a fallen creation?

These two problems mentioned are like two sides of the same coin. The first problem grows out of a concern with God the creator, the One who established a covenant with a nation to whom the law was given. Hence the question: If God is faithful, why is there a need for a redeemer? The second problem grows out of a concern with the benefits of Christ, the redeemer. If in Christ all is made new (2 Cor 5:17; cf. Isa 43:19; Rev 21:5), why bother with the old? These problems force Paul to reconstruct his theology. Though the foundation is laid *in theory*, the exigencies of Paul’s context compel him to rebuild on the concrete and particular ground of history.

I. THE JUSTIFICATION OF GOD IN HISTORY

Romans 9:1-5; 11:13-15, 29-32, 33-36

Paul’s theoretical elaboration of the doctrine of law and grace had turned the law into a universal phenomenon allowing him to level out the differences between Jews and gentiles so that grace would function for both in the same manner. The giving of the law, a criterion by which Paul defines the ethnic Israel (Rom 9:4), had been previously interpreted as an outward expression of the universal law

that binds Jews and gentiles alike, the former by the letter that was given and the latter by the heart in which the law is inscribed (Rom 2:12-29). So if through the law comes condemnation, it is on the same basis that anyone is going to be “accused” or “excused,” for what counts is not the “hearing of the law” but the “doing of the law” (Rom 2:13). Hence Paul must ask himself why the law was given. His response is that through the law that was given the awareness of sin increases and the result is that grace abounds (Rom 5:20-21). Therefore one might expect that the Jews, consciously living under an accusing law, would be obviously more receptive to the proclamation of justification by grace than those who were not bound to such objective standards that express the will of God.

Paul is painfully aware that this is not in fact the case. The gospel working in his own life was not working in most of Israel. The song of lament (Rom 9:1-5) shows that Paul is struggling with the situation and even has taken it personally (9:3). The Israelites are God's people; to them belong the giving of the law, the covenant, the glory, and above all from them came the Christ. No one can take this away from them. They are the instrument of God's salvation for all. But this instrument seems now to be obsolete, worthless. Israel seems to have been used to impart salvation to gentiles at the expense of its own salvation. If this is the case, then "the word of God has failed" (v. 6). Paul undertakes the task of explaining that this is not the case. But it is not easy. In chapter nine he tries an answer drawn from what he said in chapters two through four. This answer says that the concept "Israel" refers not to the ethnic descendants of Abraham, but to a "spiritual" Israel, to those who are descendants of the faith of Abraham. Ethnic descent from Abraham did not prevent Ishmael and Esau from being excluded from the promises. Hence the spiritualization of the concept "Israel" allows Paul to say that a Jew is one who is inwardly so (Rom 2:29).

But again the answer does not seem to suffice, for it does not account for the irony that those to whom the law was given are those who have been most hardened to the good news (Rom 11:7) and that under this very law Jesus was put to death.

In Romans 11:13-15, 29-32, Paul tries another explanation for this misadventure. The unexpected turn that his theological reflections take is recognized in the statement in verse 25: "I want you to understand this mystery." Such an opening saying typically introduces something new, something that is not contained in and does not follow directly from anything Paul had previously written. With a "skillful dialectic"¹ of "rejection" and "acceptance" (11:15) Paul imparts the mystery in 11:29-32. This mystery is revealed in that not only are the Israelites instruments of God's mercy toward the gentiles, but the gentiles in turn, by the mercy shown to them, become the divine instruments for the salvation of Israel.

The movement of the dialectic follows this course: election of a nation, rejection for the sake of accepting the gentiles, and acceptance of the rejected through the accepted gentiles. But this movement is not a mechanistic system that runs its course inexorably. Paul links this dialectic to specific human actions. The rejection would not have happened if Israel had not been disobedient and obstinate (10:21; cf. Isa 65:1-2). If this obstinacy accounts for the rejection, Paul's

¹Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 311.

self-conscious role as an apostle to the gentiles is not only interpreted as entailing the annunciation of the good news to the gentiles, but it produces a secondary effect which aims at bringing about the acceptance of the rejected (Israel). Paul expresses this by saying that through his mission he also aims at making the Jews jealous so that they might recognize what they are missing (11:13-14).

This set of pericopes finishes appropriately with a doxology, following Paul's impartation of the mystery of God's justification in Christ. What has started with a song of sorrow (9:1-5) ends with a song of praise (11:33-36). And the only reason that can explain such a change in Paul himself has to be found in the revelation of the mystery that happens in the midst of his theological journey that goes from chapter nine to chapter eleven. Paul's joy is not unlike that of

the child wrestling with a puzzle or of the mathematician with a problem, when suddenly the solution dawns. There is, however, not only joy but also praise, for he realizes that what has been hidden is now revealed in Christ: the divine wrath is a function of the divine mercy. The mystery is then manifested (11:29-32) and Paul is able to rest his case and a song of praise is addressed to the God who in Christ has manifested the divine “inscrutable ways” (11:33).

We have suggested that the composition of Romans 9-11 was prompted by the question of the relevance of the doctrine of law and grace for a particular historical entity (Israel) in a particular historical occasion (failure of the mission to the Jews). In this historical context the theory of justification is applied, worked out, and reconstructed. Romans 9-11 is itself a lesson in contextualization; it is text (Rom 1-8) in context. It is the text reworked from the perspective of the historical situation producing theological reflections that cannot be obtained directly from the text.

From the standpoint of a particular historical situation the doctrine of the universal possibility of justification by grace through faith is qualified in the sense that there is no acceptance without rejection. This shift in theological perspective brings the reader of Paul to the awareness of the problems involved in the preaching of law and gospel in which all are leveled, Jews and gentiles, slaves and masters, females and males, poor and rich. Although in face of God all ethnic, temporal, and spatial differences are rarefied, from the historical standpoint they are significant. Indeed, they might draw the line that divides rejection and acceptance. This significance is so great that Paul links his own work with God’s project of salvation in history. He emphasizes the difference that obtains in history by magnifying his ministry in order to create jealousy (11:13-14).

The same phenomenon that elicited Paul’s vindication of the historical ways of God is not absent in our midst. The proclamation of the gospel meets with limitations set by those who are rejected. It is, however, deceitful to take the response that Paul gave to that particular situation and dogmatize it toward an anti-Jewish preaching, as if Paul’s words about the rejection of Jews could be taken out of the particular context in which they were written, or as if Jesus’ calling the group of Pharisees “idolaters” was an irrevocable judgement on the whole of Israel. Such a conclusion is not only guilty of misinterpretation but also of the very fault Paul recognizes in *his* own people, of being disobedient and obstinate (11:21, 30), for hearing but not doing the law (2:13), for stumbling in

the law. It is this self-assurance—that allows for a pretentious possession of the salvific truth of God—which causes rejection. In historical terms we are instruments of divine justice and mercy. Our benefit is truly benefit only if it serves others. If any individual or group arrogates to itself the quality of being the goal of God’s historical project, rejection is the result. Christians, who think of themselves as the chief end of God’s labor in history, would do well to exercise humble restraint and self-criticism of salvific security.

Hence, before answering the question of what happens to those who are rejected, we need to clarify the problem itself, namely: Who are those who are rejected so that the mercy of God is revealed in those who are not counted among the ones to whom mercy should be shown? The same criteria that Paul used to define the character of rejection might still be used. First, rejection is the result of self-righteousness, i.e., the attitude that the possession of the means already

assures the end. Second, self-righteousness consists in hearing the law and thinking that this amounts to the doing of the law. This is also true for what frequently is called “gospel” which when owned, possessed, and domesticated, amounts to a work of law.

In the midst of modern Judeo-Christian morality the phenomenon of Pharisaism—which in the gospel epitomizes the inversion of means and ends—is not strange to many Christians. And it is not strange either that the condemnation of modern Pharisaism has resulted in the acceptance of new “gentiles” at the fringes of the modern Torah and sometimes definitely outside of the walls of new temples and synagogues which are now called churches. Once more the phenomenon of jealousy repeats itself. For example, the emergence of grassroots communities, here and overseas, has frequently produced a healthy jealousy in stagnant churches that now stumble again and again on the stone of a “new” covenant that has aged. Furthermore, Paul’s pragmatic missiological project continues alive in the prophetic awareness of those who, like him, are instruments of jealousy.

Before misconceptions arise about the nature of this jealousy it should be noted that it is not linked to the success of Paul’s ministry. It is not measured by any church-growth or church-wealth standard. Paul’s reference to *magnifying* (*doxazein*) his ministry has the sense of manifesting the glory of God’s grace in the fact that newness is created where it is not expected. In this sense Käsemann is right when he calls attention to the fact “that grace is understood as a power which overcomes unbelief and brings to faith. Miracle is therefore the presupposition of faith.”² Miracle is the novelty of life where one might expect to see only death, deprivation, suffering and desperation. That pagans receive the good news, while those educated for its reception were unable to find it, is miracle. Paul is here the prophet who sees in the insignificant and in the irrelevant the sign and the miracle (*semeion*) that renews the old and brings to faith. This text issues a call for ministry to be a magnification of that which God does with those “in low estate,” exalting “those of low degree” as it is stated in the hymn which is not by chance known as the *magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55). Thus the doxology of Romans 11:33-36 seems to be the only mode in which Paul could

²Ibid.

conclude the presentation of the mystery; he must rejoice in it, for what is revealed is a miracle and not a new law.

II. IN PRACTICE THE THEORY IS DIFFERENT

Romans 12:1-8; 13:1-10

We now turn the coin over and address the second question confronting Paul, namely, if in Christ the believer walks in newness of life, does anything of the old aeon still have claims upon her or him? Again the fundamental problem, as in chapters nine to eleven, is the historical significance of the theory of justification. But while in the previous pericopes Paul addressed the problem taking into consideration those who rejected the justifying power of grace, here he addresses the problem from the standpoint of those who have been received in grace. At stake here are not God’s promises and God’s honor, but God’s power in the life of believers.

In his response to the first question Paul has already made an answer to the second

question more difficult. His eloquent account of God's mystery appears to render any appeal to the old aeon as an indication of self-righteousness (of the type "I-have-a-contract-signed-by-God") and therefore of rejection. Now in the two first verses of chapter twelve, which serve as an introduction to this section of the letter (Rom 12-15:13), Paul probes the matter more deeply. His appeal to the Christians in Rome "to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (v. 1) entails a hidden polemic directed against pagan cultic rituals and sacrifices and affirms the sanctity of the profane as it stands, as profane. This sanctity is not attained by any purification ritual or by moral puritanism, but for Paul it consists wholly in abandoning any self-righteous search for perfection. It is in this sense that the non-conformity to this world in the following verses should be understood. In the same way as he in previous sections denounced those who have stumbled in the stone of the law, Paul here denounces those who in the midst of a non-Jewish environment conform themselves to the rules and precepts of the prevailing morality. The call to be "transformed" by the "renewal of mind" expresses the need for a total reorientation of life involving repentance and rebirth.

But if all depends on this renewal of one's mind, which in turn is contingent upon God's grace and the gift of freedom, are we not then faced with an either-or proposition? Either there is grace, acceptance, and renewal, and therefore freedom, or there is conformity to the world, and therefore rejection. No middle term seems possible. With this conclusion there is no objective limit to the Christian exercise of freedom since nothing can stand in the way (cf. 8:38-39) of this absolute certainty.

We have seen how Paul in Romans 9-11 shifted his perspective on justification when addressing the historical context in Israel. Now in the following text he makes the same move.

A. Community Life and Love: Romans 12:1-8

The first element that resets Paul's theological perspective is the community context itself. The analogy of the body serves in Romans 12:3-8 to illustrate

this shift. The point of the analogy is obvious: As a body needs many members, each one fulfilling its proper function, so too does the church, the body of Christ. It is in each member fulfilling its proper function that the body is well served. Members that do not fulfill the task for which they exist do not only imperil the life of the organism but also become a menace to themselves. With this image Paul is framing his polemic against charismatic tendencies in the community and he repeats the same exhortations contained in 1 Corinthians 12. "The anti-enthusiastic thrust" of this text, noted Käsemann, "manifests itself in placing ecstatic ministries in parallel with administrative ministries."³

But more important than the use of the illustration is what prompted it. The apostle admonished Christians to avoid thinking of themselves more highly than they ought (Rom 12:3). But lest they think that this admonition would be justified by a rhetorical appeal to dependence on God, Paul introduces another criterion: the "measure of faith." The argument is not an attack on the pride of those who attribute to themselves the merits of their accomplishments, but rather it is a critique of pious enthusiasts who claim, in whatever they do, that God has empowered them. Paul is saying that no one has the right to claim that God has empowered her or him without limit. But the obvious question then is: How can faith have a measure and therefore be

limited if it is a gift without measure through which we are reconciled and by which we are made “more than conquerors” (Rom 8:37)? How can this faith have a measure if it is the means through which we are reconciled with God in Christ? This puzzle can only be solved if we realize once more that the context has made Paul shift his theological perspective from abstract explanations of the relationship between God and the world to the analysis of the ways of God *in* the world. In the face of God the question of faith is indeed an either-or, separated by an unlimited and infinite gap. But in the face of historical existence, faith is always limited, qualified, and needs to be discerned. In other words, the *actual* manifestations of faith are always a relative but concrete expression of what faith is in itself or in theory.

The criterion for the discernment (*sōphronein*, Rom 12:3) of the actual expressions of faith is not elaborated by Paul here except that he calls it *agapē* (Rom 12:9). A more detailed examination of the criterion for discernment (love) is given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13.

Romans 13:8-10 actually concludes the thoughts which Paul develops in chapter twelve. Since it is apparent that Paul’s appeal to the great commandment is done only insofar as it summarizes the second table of the law which refers to human social existence, the silence about the love of God is indicative not of a lapse of memory on the part of Paul, but of the fact that he is addressing his theological concern to the presence of God *in* history, society, and community.

Within this perspective in which faith is viewed in its *actual* expression in the community, Paul claims that the gifts of faith will have to be examined by the measure of the efficacy of love, as a function of an individual in community, on the basis of the complementarity of these gifts in the life of the community.

With this in mind, Paul’s beloved metaphor of the body assumes its proper illustrative place. The point of the metaphor is not the presentation of the

³Ibid., 333.

“idea” of the organism with the functions of the members statically established. The point is rather to emphasize the diversity of functions, the objective limitations of these functions within the community, and the ability of individuals to perform these functions for the enhancement of the community.

This text, like the previous ones discussed, is a lesson in contextualization. It is not a static doctrinal statement, but rather it is an effort toward the reconstruction of doctrine itself. Hence the fundamental structure of the development of Paul’s argument is more important than that which occasioned Paul’s response, or rather, the occasion has to be redefined to the extent of the distance in which Christians now stand from the first century communities that raised Paul’s concern.

There are certainly today some charismatics, utopians, and idealists who claim to have the secret of how to bring an ideal heaven down to earth. They are confused about the organizational complementarity of functions in the life of the community. Likewise, those who would like to keep women partially alienated from full participation in the community according to their gifts are confused, and should find in this text incisive admonitions against themselves. The fact is, this text restrains Paul’s own prejudices just as it continually restrains many prejudices against minority cultures (these prejudices can be far more subtle and disguised than racial ones) that undermine full participation in worship and community life. This same critique is leveled against

restrictions on full communal participation by the physically disabled and the homosexually inclined. Too often the former are eyed with demeaning paternalism, and the latter are judged by tenuous and subjective standards of “normality.” This text, however, assumes that efficacy of love, demonstrated within community, and according to each member’s measure of faith, is the standard upon which the life of the church is grounded.

The fundamental point of this passage is that the measure of faith—which is not a quantifiable datum but the discernment of the concrete manifestation of the gifts of the spirit—is linked to the sort of person one is. The gifts of faith are not opposed to one’s training, limitations, background, and traits; these are instead the means by which the Spirit ministers within the community. Hence, no traits, limitations, training, or background can be deemed unworthy if they are to be vehicles of love.

B. *Civil Society and Justice: Romans 13:1-7*

This next text moves from the context of the community to the life of the Christians in society under secular authorities. It has been used to theologically defend the Hitler regime in Germany in the 1930s, and in the mid-1970s it was again used (along with the Augsburg Confession XVI) by the majoritarian faction of the Lutheran Church in Chile to justify support for the Pinochet regime.

There have been two traditional lines of interpretation of this text in this century. One emphasizes that Paul was uttering a positive principle in which government is viewed as an “order of creation” without which society would lack the minimal organization and order. According to this view, Paul was not issuing any moral assessment of the Roman Empire under Nero, but a

theological principle that says that governments are structures of authority mandated by God for the ordering of civil society.⁴

The second interpretation regards Paul’s admonition in Romans 13:1-7 as a negative principle. Paul is supposedly addressing not the question of the divine nature of authority, nor is Paul speculating about orders of creation. The point of the admonition, according to this view, is found in the negative nature of Paul’s exhortation, i.e., that Christians should *not* put their minds on high things, should *not* be guided by a desire for power and by pride.⁵

Both interpretations have been challenged in more recent times. For Käsemann this text is an “alien body in Paul’s exhortation,” which has an “anti-enthusiastic function.”⁶ For Harrisville it is a piece of “realistic opportunism.”⁷ According to these interpretations Paul is uttering an ad hoc admonition that is framed by his concern that the socially marginal community of Rome might be led to think that the power of grace had placed it on the threshold of the kingdom of God and that all that was required was to take a political step forward and the heavens would come down. Paul’s concern is marked by a political pragmatism which is supposedly recognized in the bureaucratic jargon of these verses.

These latter interpretations are a welcome corrective to the previous ones which, under the spell of the theoretical arguments in the letter, could not think that Paul would be able to give a piece of pragmatic advice. The difficulty which remains with these, however, is to connect Paul’s eloquent description of the freedom of the Christian and this realistic pragmatism. It

appears that Paul almost lost track of his theological convictions and felt compelled to put down some words aimed at curtailing enthusiastic tendencies that could lead to anarchy and finally to the annihilation of the community by the state. However, the assumption that charismatic and enthusiastic tendencies lead necessarily to political anarchism is unwarranted. Only if this could be proven would such an interpretation be viable. As a rule, religious enthusiasm leads to political revolt only when it becomes a massive homogenous movement under unpopular regimes. If this was the case with the left wing of the Reformation and in messianic movements throughout the world in more recent times, it could not have been the case with the minoritarian community in Rome.

Studies in contemporary charismatic movements have shown a strong tendency to conformism and political indifference to the rules of the state even when the nature of the authority undergoes revolutionary changes.⁸ There is, therefore, no reason to suppose that the Christians minoritarian and marginalized in Rome (the capital of the Empire, a very unlikely place for a popular revolution to start) could ever conceive of themselves as a political power. Besides, Nero, outrageous butcher as he certainly was, was a popular ruler, hated primarily by the aristocracy. Hence a hypothesis of an alliance of Christians with a popular revolutionary movement has to be discarded.

⁴See Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 101-7.

⁵Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University, 1933) 477-78.

⁶E. Käsemann, *Romans*, 351-52.

⁷Roy Harrisville, *Romans* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980) 205.

⁸Christian Lalive D'Epina, *The Haven of the Masses* (London: Lutterworth, 1969) 106-45.

Finally, in spite of the fact that Paul is using bureaucratic jargon which weakens the theological claims of this text, Paul does make explicit theological claims. With surprising frequency God is referred to in every verse except three and seven. Verse three is scandalous for what it does not say. It states that “rulers are not a terror for good conduct,” and Paul does not even raise the possibility that they might very well be. Paul must have been aware that they actually were—he must have known at least of Claudius’ persecution of Jews (Acts 18:2). As inept as Paul may have been in social and political issues, and misinformed about historical events, he could not have been so much so as to believe that his statement in verse three was analytically accurate, for Paul himself was persecuted and he certainly was aware that Pontius Pilate used his *exousia* to condemn Jesus.

What is normally missed in the interpretation of this passage is that the fundamental social feature of charismatic groups, whether they become revolutionary or not, is their tendency to form alternative social organizations and to isolate themselves from civil society. Even when they are involved in overt political struggle, though rare, it seems the rule that they are first attacked by the state that sees in the parallel social ethos a threat to the *legitimacy* of the public order. Paul must have been more aware of this phenomenon than many of his interpreters, for the only concrete practical advice in this pericope (vv. 6-7) refers to the need of Christians to participate in the state, assuming the responsibility of paying taxes and becoming integrated in the economic order. If this is the case, then, the meaning of this pericope lies neither in the affirmation of the state as an order of creation, nor in a negative principle to restrain one’s will to

power, nor simply in parenthetical pragmatic advice. Paul's agenda is indeed determined by the context of Christian existence within civil society, but this is so only in the sense that he is concerned with the danger of the Christian community *exempting* itself from civil obligations and political participation by forming an alternative social ethos. Furthermore, Paul is primarily concerned that this lack of participation leads to indifference and conformism. For this reason this text is still under the section introduced by the exhortation "do not be conformed to this world" (Rom 12:2).

It was through the payment of taxes and the participation in economic life that the citizens of the Roman empire defined their fundamental participation in civil society. It was on the basis of the *economic* life more than in political activity in the modern sense that individuals were then integrated into the structure of the state and of authority. Only if this participation existed could justice be established. This is Paul's criterion for civil existence and it is expressed in Paul's adoption of the Roman principle of justice that has become the foundation even of modern legal rights: to each one what to each is due (*suum cuique*). This was also the basis for the concept of democracy which only in the modern understanding of the state shifted its primary focus from socio-economic participation to political order. There can be no doubt that Paul's exhortation, instead of focusing on restraint, is an admonition to Christians to participate in civil society through the channels available for this participation.

As to the Christian existence in society, the problem that Paul was facing was more likely one of indifference than of undiscipline. Paul called Christians

to participate in the structure of authority in the most fundamental process by which this participation was possible at that time. Without this participation justice cannot be accomplished.

Two basic features distinguish modern civil society in the western world from the one prevailing at the time of Paul. First, the nature of the participation and therefore the nature of authority itself has changed. In the western world since the French Revolution the concept of democracy that defines the participation of individuals in civil society has changed from an economic basis to a political one. It is only logical, therefore, to assume that Paul's remark about payment of taxes has now to be transferred to the political arena of participation in elections, participation in political organizations, groups, and even demonstrations so as to preclude indifference to public life, provided that these are now the channels of participation that are institutionally recognized by the modern western states.

The second basic feature distinguishing our understanding of the state from the one prevailing in Paul's day is that states today have built-in mechanisms for change. To their definition belongs the fact that they are historically transient. What was in pre-modern societies an impossible thought is now a common assumption concerning modern political life: governments change and those which are most intransigent eventually fall. Hence, a part of our civil responsibility is to share the task of the state in its constant creating justice in a fast changing world. Conversely, it also entails opposition to a state which does not fulfill the principle of justice (and the criterion here is not love!), or to the extent that it prevents participation. Romans 13:1-7 not only allows for this conclusion but demands it, and demands it to be made in public, provided that participation in civil society is now linked to the constant transformation of the state.

III. ISSUES NOT WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Romans 14:5-9

The previous two pericopes have addressed the questions of community ethos and civil ethos, respectively. Now Paul comes to the discussion of personal ethos. Paul continues to address this problem from the standpoint of history. He first assumes that personal morality, rules, codes, and etiquette can serve as means to honor God (Rom 14:6). Previously in the discussion of law Paul had stated that the debasement of the law comes by the hearing of the law without the doing of the law (Rom 4:13). For Paul some gentiles were doing what the law required without being aware of the fact that they were obeying the will of God. Why is Paul so magnanimous right after he had put so much effort in calling for a critical examination of Christian life in community and society? The call for tolerance cannot be diluted even by the assertion that it is done in the “honor of God” (Rom 9:6), for Paul here is only rhetorically stating his case, given that he does not provide any criterion to examine such a claim. Therefore, for Paul, whatever is decided on the basis of personal conscience allows for a vindication that it is done in honor of God. This text puts us in even greater difficulty if we keep in mind that in Romans 13:1-7 Paul was making an appeal for Christians to

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participate in public life and to be accountable in it. And in Romans 12:2 Paul claimed that the renewal of one’s mind entails an objective demonstration or proof (*dokimazein*) of what is good.

A possible way out of the dilemma would be to interpret this tolerance in terms of the variety of gifts that the Spirit produces, along the lines of Romans 12:3-8. In this sense the tolerance required would refer to the need to accept different *gifts*. But the difficulty with this is that Paul is clearly not referring to gifts of service to the community, and he is not upholding any understanding of complementary functions between those who eat only certain foods, those who esteem certain days, and those for whom eating or esteeming particular days is not a matter of conscience. Paul even declares himself to be beyond these issues when he declares “that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean only for anyone who thinks it unclean” (Rom 14:13).

Lest we conclude that tolerance is the loftiest of Christian virtues, verse 17 intervenes: “For the kingdom of God does not mean food and drink, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” These three criteria, justice, peace, and joy were spelled out in the previous pericopes. Joy was the response to the mystery which was manifested in God’s justification in history (Rom 11). Peace is the result of love (Rom 12), and justice is reason for participating in civil society (Rom 13). These are the criteria that make a difference and toward which one cannot be indifferent, equivocal, or even tolerant. Questions of personal conscience, tastes and preferences, and mores and etiquette are adiaphora. Paul’s stringency in the previous pericopes is not overruled or contradicted by the defense of tolerance in chapter 14. There is no doubt that Paul had clear opinions about matters of conscience, but he does not want to argue them here. Much more is at stake than private morality. He is concerned with issues more constitutive for the Kingdom, issues in which God’s justification of history is at stake, and issues which manifest themselves in the historical relationship between acceptance and rejection (Rom 11), in the discernment of gifts in a loving community of solidarity (Rom 12), and in the Christian participation in public life for the creation of justice (Rom 13).

Certainly one could argue that issues supposedly belonging to personal conscience always affect social and community life. The dividing line between the personal and the social is nebulous, but in case of doubt the adjudication of such issues does not lie in an individual's conscience, but rather in the community's appraisal of how an action effects love or imperils justice. One may esteem one day better than the other, but the bottom line still is: "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). In other words, community life and functional well-being are prior to individual scrupulosity. Both individual morality and private rights are secondary to efficacious love and justice at the social level.

What Paul is saying amounts to this: Do not make a big deal about things that do not really matter. Get your priorities straight. This text (and not Rom 13, as some suggest) is a lesson in the tactics of setting priorities for the achievement of efficacious love and justice.

Priority-setting errors have two faces. First, there are issues which are inherently public but are privatized, such as religious beliefs and practices,

politics, homosexuality, and so forth. And second, there are issues that lack public relevance which become central topics of public discourse. Gossip typifies this error. But the real manifestation of this problem of tactics happens in more subtle manifestations of the confusion of priorities. Sexism or racism might be disguised in discussions about manners, tastes, and life style, as the defamatory campaign led by the FBI against Martin Luther King, Jr., to discredit his public persona exemplifies. This is a blatant example of misplaced priorities aimed at diverting attention from the significant. Such errors of priority, whether intentional or not, need to be informed by the criteria that Paul has proposed, namely, what enhances the efficacy of demonstrable love in community, and what makes possible participation in society so as to bring about justice.