THE ARGUMENT OF ROMANS 13:1-7

by

ROBERT H. STEIN
Bethel Theological Seminary, St. Paul

The clearest passage in the New Testament dealing with the relationship of the Christian to the State is found in Rom 13:1-7. Although other important passages discuss this issue, nowhere else is the argument as clearly and as carefully constructed. A great deal has been written on this passage concerning such things as: its authentic or non-authentic nature; its origin; non-Pauline editorial additions; the historical situation in Rome which occasioned this passage; parallels in Jewish, pagan, and Christian literature; lexical studies such as the meaning of the words "authorities," "conscience," "sword"; etc. Surprisingly little, however, has been written on the argument of this passage. It is interesting to note in this regard the disproportionate amount of time and energy that has been spent on "background materials" to Rom 13:1-7 and how little has been spent in seeking to understand how the statements found in this passage relate to one another to form a cohesive argument. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the construction of the Pauline argument found in this passage.²

The exact relationship of Rom 13:1-7 to its context has frequently been discussed. Numerous attempts have been made to

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show that it is not simply an intrusion into the context, but that it has significant ties to what precedes and follows. Some see the passage as flowing out of 12:18 ("If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.") because in 13:1-7 Paul is seeking to describe how to live peaceably with the state. It has also been pointed out that in 12:19 Paul states that wrath and vengeance belong to the Lord, and 13:4-5 refer to the wrath of God. The word ἀπόδοτε ("pay") in 13:7 is also found in 12:17, and 13:8 which speaks of the "debt of love" does seem to allude to the paying of the debts of taxes and tribute in 13:7. It has also been suggested that the reference to non-resistance toward evil in 12:21 fits 13:1-7 well, so that "the transition from 12:21 to 13:1ff... was a perfectly logical, natural one." Even if there are ties with the immediately surrounding materials, it must nevertheless be admitted that the ties are at best loose. Rom 13:1-7 does appear to be "eine selbständige Einlage" or "self-contained passage which as such cannot be directly associated with the command to love one's enemy in 12:20f. or with the demand for love in 13:8-10 or with the eschatological conclusion of the general exhortation in 13:11ff..."

The argument

1. The command (13:1a)

The passage begins with the command "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." While addressed to the Christians at Rome, "every person" clearly indicates that all people, Christian or non-Christian, should obey this command. This is even more evident later in the verse when the ground for such subjection is given as the ordinance of God founded upon crea-

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4 O. Michel, Der Brief an die Römer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963) 312.