

Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. Whenever you have opportunity, work for the good of all (Galatians 6:9f).

On this national holiday weekend, it is appropriate to consider the New Testament's view of the relationship between "church" and state. Perhaps it is better to say between the Christian, or follower of Jesus, and the state, for in the first century C. E. we have a number of diverse congregations rather than anything resembling an institutional church.

Paul's view is expressed in his letter to the church at Rome. Paul was a Roman citizen and enjoyed the protection of due process afforded citizens. He writes, *Let every person be subordinate to the higher authorities (Rome/state), for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been established by God.*

Therefore, whoever resists authority (the state) opposes what God has appointed, and those who oppose it will bring judgment upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear to good conduct, but to evil.

Do you wish to have no fear of authority? Then do what is good and you will receive approval from it, for it (the state) is a servant of God for your good. But if you do evil, be afraid, for it (the state) does not bear the sword without purpose; it is the servant of God to inflict wrath on the evil doer.

This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God (think about that: the courts, the police, the FBI, are ministers of God), devoting themselves to this very thing (working for the good of all). Pay to all their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, toll to whom toll is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due (Romans 13:1-7).

In Paul's view the state is divinely ordained to protect those who do good and to punish those who cheat, steal, injure, or murder others. As our Liturgy for National Occasions reads, *Enable us to accept the authority of government for your (God's) sake, ready for every good work, abstaining from every form of evil, and paying to all whatever is due them.*

The Book of Acts reports Paul being flogged, imprisoned and released on a regular basis. Finally, Paul asserts his right as a Roman citizen and appeals his case to the emperor. Festus, procurator (governor) of Judea declares: "You have appealed to the emperor; to the emperor you will go" (Acts 25:12). The emperor was Nero.

Paul knew Jesus was crucified by Rome. Paul, according to tradition, was beheaded by Rome; crucifixion was reserved for non-citizens. One wonders if Paul, in the moment, still believed the state was divinely ordained to protect the innocent and punish the evil doer?

Peter, not a Roman citizen, echoed Paul's advice: *Be subject to every human institution for the Lord's sake, whether it be to the king as supreme or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evil doers and the approval of those who do good.*

For it is the will of God that by doing good you may silence the ignorance of foolish people. Be free, yet without using freedom as a pretext for evil, but as slaves of God. Give honor to all, love the community, fear God, honor the king (1 Peter 2:13-17).

Peter's caveat to Paul's advice is that the Christian owes a larger allegiance to God than to Caesar. When Peter is ordered to stop preaching, he responds *We must obey God rather than man* (Acts 5:29).

Peter, according to tradition, was crucified upside down in Rome by Rome. Both Peter and Paul were executed by the state for obeying God rather than the emperor.

By the time we get to the Book of Revelation, Rome (the state) is imaged as the Great Whore, with the emperor as the seven-headed "beast from the sea." The state and the ruler are no longer servants of God but servants of Satan, carrying out Satan's war against God on earth.

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. Paul believes a moral law governs human life as surely as natural laws govern matter. Our behavior is consequential. Denying the reality of the good, believing the good is a social construct without any objective reality, is as foolish as denying the reality of gravity.

From the time before Nero to the present, rulers have preferred power, preferred remaining in power, to working for the common good. The peaceful transfer of power for the good of all is willfully sacrificed on the altar of the ruler's ego. The consequence is violence. To whore after power rather than serving the good of all, makes one a minister, not of God, but of Satan.

What is the Christian who lives in such a state to do? *Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. Whenever you have opportunity, work for the good of all.*

Working for the good of all may make you a martyr (a witness) like Jesus, like Paul, like Peter, to a higher loyalty but it will not make you a traitor.