



Episode 767: Romans 13: Does It Mean Christians Can't Be Libertarians?

Guest: Larry Beane

WOODS: Well, I can't believe it took me this long to figure out that I should have you on. Everything I see from you I just love, whether it's on Facebook or that letter that you wrote to Loyola University in New Orleans about Walter Block. That was just devastating. I wrote a nice letter on Walter's behalf, but then when I read yours I thought, well, I'm proud to take the silver medal if Pastor Larry Beane is involved. So that was so, so beautifully, masterfully done. You smashed them so badly. And the beautiful thing is that as a Protestant, the funny thing is for the type of people who run Loyola University who – I mean, look, I can't fully speak for them, but I know these types. Believe me. I know a lot of these types. They can't stand – they really can't stand the traditional Catholic Church –

BEANE: Yes.

WOODS: – so they really do care a lot more about the opinion of a Protestant. So I was so glad that you came along. Like, they couldn't care less about me. I'm totally dispensable.

All right, I just have a bunch of things that I want to talk to you about, because you're a smart guy and I love what I read from you, and you are a PC slayer. And yet you're a Lutheran pastor, and when I visited the Harvard campus for a Mises event earlier this month, I was walking by University Lutheran, which we knew as UniLu, which probably should have been like Looney Tunes because of these people. And I actually took a picture of their new sign, which more or less indicates that everybody is welcome at University Lutheran except Martin Luther. In fact, I was almost going to send the picture home with the caption, "Just the way Luther would have wanted it." Are you Missouri Synod?

BEANE: Yes, I'm a Missouri Synod Lutheran, and of course in Lutheranism it's like in Roman Catholicism; there are various sort of factions. And in Lutheranism they're actually separate denominations, but my denomination tends toward conservatism and very traditional, sort of Catholic orthodoxy within our Lutheran tradition.

WOODS: All right, so that's what I want to start off with, because this is not something that is exclusive to Lutheranism, but it seems like it's a big, big problem over there. You don't have to deal with it probably as much in the Missouri Synod, but the larges of the Lutheran groups is the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. And there I don't quite get what they consider their historic attachment to the man Martin Luther and

the thought of Martin Luther, in the same way that I don't see how anybody can be a leftist in the Catholic Church. You look at 2,000 years, whatever you want to say about 2,000 years of Catholicism has nothing to do with leftism whatsoever. Is that you feel about the ELCA?

BEANE: Yeah, it's an analogous situation. Martin Luther was quite a conservative figure, and the Reformation splintered into different factions, but the Lutheran Reformation was very, very conservative. Even our liturgy was virtually identical to the Roman Catholic liturgy of the time. But the ELCA is a recent creation. It was an amalgamation of several different denominations. It was formed I believe in the early 1980s, and it very quickly became more of an expression of leftist political ideas over and against traditional theology as the Church confessed it for over 2,000 years.

WOODS: So that then leads me to another question, which is would you describe yourself as a libertarian?

BEANE: Absolutely.

WOODS: All right, now I understand that obviously what matters are the theological principles of Luther and not his private opinions on various things, but it does seem like those two blend into each other, not just in Luther's case but in the case of many theologians. And I would not in any way describe Luther as a libertarian. What do you see that Luther missed?

BEANE: Well, first of all, the name Lutheran was put upon as a kind of an insult or to try to detract from our Catholicism or our Christianity, and so it's kind of an unfortunate thing, but the name stuck, of course. We don't acknowledge every single writing of Martin Luther. We acknowledge – some of his writings are confessional documents that constitute what Lutherans confess. It's called the Book of Concord, and it was published in 1580. So in many cases, Luther was a brilliant, brilliant theologian and doctor of the Church. Sometimes he just said things that were really goofy. Sometimes, a lot of his recorded writings were done around the dinner table where he was just sort of cutting up. So Luther is often times greatly misinterpreted or misrepresented by people on all sides. So we acknowledge some of Luther's writings but certainly not all of them.

But basically we are in the continuity in the Catholic tradition, going back to the apostles, the Reformation we really see it as an unfortunate conflict within the Church, but from our point of view it was something that was necessary to happen to restore an understanding of the Gospel that had been kind of covered up through corruption in the Middle Ages. So Luther tended to be a person of his times. He was very much a statist. He really – in those days you had an imperial form of government in Germany, in Europe, and there was really no sense of any other way to govern oneself. I mean, today we don't have an emperor, at least not officially. We have republics all around the world. We have various democratic institutions that just didn't exist in the Middle Ages. So the world has kind of changed in the way we govern ourselves, and 500 years from now it may be quite different as well. But the principles of Christianity and the Church, we still confess that, no matter what type of government or governance that we may have in the future.

WOODS: What about Romans 13? I'm curious about Luther's interpretation of it and your – okay, three things. Luther's interpretation of Romans 13, your interpretation of Romans 13, and thirdly the accusation that maybe in the case of Christian libertarians, the ideology is pulling the theological cart. You know? Is the horse pulling the cart? That really we want to be libertarians, and the Christian don't really allow it, so we come up with these tendentious interpretations that allow us to sleep at night.

BEANE: Yeah, it's a great question, and it's a text that is often used as sort of, well, here's your knockout punch. You can't be a libertarian because Romans 13. Okay, let's move on now. But I think we really need to look at the text, and as far as the way it's been understood throughout the ages, I think a lot of it has to do with what kind of governance you live in. I mean, if you live in a monarchy, if you live in a democracy, if you live in communist Russia, what you owe your "rulers," it may be different than if you have a benevolent Christian king or if you have a secular republic. There's a principle that is being confessed in Romans 13.

And here's what I think is the main misunderstanding or misreading of Romans 13. Verse 1 says – I'm using the English Standard translation, which I think is illustrative. "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."

Well, "governing authorities." What's the first thing that pops in your mind when you hear those words? It sounds like government. And in your mind, at least for me, I don't stop with "government"; I put a "the" in front of it. Obey "the government," because there is no just "government"; there is "the government," because there's only one. It's a monopoly. But when you read the text in its original Greek form, it says "authority," and it says "the higher authorities." So there is authority in the world that keeps us from chaos. Authority is not a bad thing, and libertarians aren't against authority. For instance, in your home, if you have a family, if you have children, you exercise authority over the children. You tell them when to go to bed and all of that, and in that context that's a godly use of authority. But notice it's not state authority; it's private authority.

Or in society – I mean, no libertarian wants to live in a society where people can just take your stuff and kill you. We do believe in authority. We believe in justice. We believe in, as Romans 13 says, you have authorities that reward good behavior and punish bad behavior. So libertarians are not against law and order, but when you narrow it down to the state and say that this authority must be an expression of a monopolistic use of unchecked power that can be abusive and you're not allowed to criticize it, because, as this text says, the authority is the minister of God, I think that's a misuse of Romans 13.

Let me give you a couple of examples of private authority that I think does come under this rubric, because I interpret Romans 13 much more strongly I think than a statist does, because I don't see it as the government; I see it as all authority by which God uses to keep order in society. Like for instance, you just went on a cruise, right? You had that great experience that would have been wonderful to be there on the Contra Cruise. I was on a cruise ship a few years ago, and I thought it was really interesting that the captain and the officers wear military insignia, but they're not government. They work for a private company. But yet under maritime law, these

private civilian people have authority. I mean, the captain can put you in the brig, and you can't just call your lawyer or wave your passport. When you're on the seas, he is the authority, and I would say Romans 13 obliges Christian people to submit to his authority and to not beat other people up and steal their stuff on the boat. So that's a private authority; it's not necessarily a state authority.

The other one that I wanted to point out is the world's largest institution in history is the Roman Catholic Church. And what does the Roman Catholic Church do? It divides the whole world up into geographical districts called diocese, and they're each overseen by a bishop. And there's a system of canon law; there are rules; there's punishment for transgression. And at the same time, it's voluntary. It's not a state. I mean, the Vatican is a state, but that's a different story. But Roman Catholics live in this sort of voluntary government. I live in the geographical confines of the archbishop of New Orleans, but I'm not under his authority; I'm under a different ecclesiastical authority, and we all coexist. So this is kind of a libertarian, even an anarchist model of governance. It's voluntary. We can shift from one governance to the other, and yet there is authority that Romans 13 obliges us to obey for good order in our world.

WOODS: All right, I've got a couple comebacks to that – not comebacks, but follow-ups.

BEANE: Sure.

WOODS: I guess I should say for the record just so everybody understands that obviously you and I have a different assessment of the Reformation and its merits, so just so that's on the record so that people don't write to me, "Why didn't you push back?" Because that's not why I invited you.

But secondly, I mean, as you well know, there are other texts that could be used as so-called proof texts about the state and wielding the sword and taxation that if you were to read them, let's say, without any prior ideological commitments, you could see why somebody would think that the state is being endorsed in these texts. So again, doesn't it sound like you have to get yourself into contortions to have them read some other way?

BEANE: You know, it's funny, because with taxes people do come up with the "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's; render unto God what is God's." And a lot of people don't understand the context of what was going on there. For observant Jews to be in the temple, they shouldn't even have had coins with Caesar's image on them. That was considered blasphemous. So they were supposed to have changed their currency outside before bringing it inside, and really, Jesus, when he says, bring me a coin and who's image is on it, he's really turning the charge around on them. When he says, give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's, well, is there anything that belongs to Caesar that isn't also God's? So Jesus left it kind of ambiguous. But people will say, well, Jesus says that taxes are moral or what have you or he's endorsing the Roman state.

Here's a passage from – if I could read just a couple verses here from Matthew 17 that just makes me laugh every time I read it. I think here's how Jesus views taxes, and it's beginning at verse 24:

"When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the half shekel tax went up to Peter and said, 'Does your teacher not pay the tax?' 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?' And when he said, 'From others,' Jesus said to him, 'Then the sons are free. 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'll find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself.'"

And you'll notice that Jesus's goal here is not to offend them. He doesn't say, oh, well, we must pay this, or we owe it. In fact, he says, who owns the sons of the kingdom? We belong to Christ's kingdom. Do the rulers of the earth tax fairly? Do they really – do they tax their own sons? Do they tax their own political constituencies? And Jesus says just pay it so you don't offend them. And I really believe in that. I believe in paying everything the state says we owe. I don't advocate making a martyr out of yourself to try to protest taxes. I think a better way to oppose unjust taxation is with the power of ideas, rather than sitting in a jail cell. But it's not as cut and dried as statisticians like to make it out to be. I mean, absolutely.

You know, I think there's something to be said for if government does provide genuine services, then we should pay for those services. But on the other hand, we're not given a choice. Government does things and then taxes us without really asking us as individuals are you going to drive on this road, are you going to use this particular government service. And really that's not a good way to do business, really. I mean, pretty much every – I would say every function government does can be privatized, and the libertarian argument is this is a much more humane and efficient way to live together in society and to provide goods and services. I mean, would you rather go to the Apple store or the DMV? Private businesses have to compete. They have to innovate. And they don't have a power to put a gun to your head and take your money. So really libertarianism is nothing more than saying let's privatize things that government is currently doing. And there's really nothing in Scripture against that.

WOODS: All right, I also want to talk about political correctness with you, and we'll do that after we thank our sponsor.

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All right, I want to shift gears. First I want to ask you, do I have permission – I don't know if it was published online or not, but do I have permission to publish on my site the text of the letter you wrote to Loyola for Walter Block?

BEANE: Oh, absolutely, Tom. Absolutely.

WOODS: I'm telling you, if you're listening to this, I'll link to it at TomWoods.com/767. You have to give yourself the pleasure of reading this letter. I just looked at it again before you and I spoke, and I thought, well, I'll read a couple paragraphs on the air. But I couldn't figure out which ones to read. I want to read the whole letter, and it would take too long. It is such – I'm a tough critic of writers. I'm a tough, tough critic. And I can't see one syllable I would have changed in this letter, or that I could improve

upon in this letter. It is so, so beautifully written. You smashed these so-called open-minded, tolerant PC people, smashed them so beautifully that I'm telling you if you're listening to this, you're depriving yourself unjustly of a tremendous pleasure. So go to TomWoods.com/767 if you have not yet seen this letter, and chances are you have not.

Now, let's say a little something — I want to shift gears to political correctness, just because that's just something that drives me so crazy. It drove me crazy when I was in college, then I kind of forgot about it for a while because I thought that's something you worry about when you're in college and it's only on college campuses, but now in my day those kids have now graduated, and they're spreading it to every nook and cranny of society to the point where people don't feel safe expressing their opinions on a wide variety of subjects. We know everybody will get in line when certain subjects come up, and there's an official position that every CEO, every political figure, every newscaster, every college professor will hold, and if you don't hold it you'll be hounded. It's unbelievable. And I've read a lot of stuff by you on this that is so on target that I think you are as tormented by it as I am.

BEANE: Absolutely, and you mentioned Dr. Block. I have to just say, you know, I have not met a more gentlemanly, academically gifted, and just kindhearted, friendly person than Walter Block, and the way he was treated was not just shameful, not just a violation of academic freedom, but it was downright un-Christian. You know, I'll go even further. I'll say it was anti-Christian. The way Dr. Block was treated was diabolical, and that's what prompted me to write that letter to the administration. It was very sad.

Here's the irony: again, like you said, I'm a Lutheran, and the Jesuits were formed basically the burn us at the stake. I mean, historically that was their cause. And Walter Block is a Jewish atheist, so the great irony is that this Christian institution would persecute a Jewish atheist over his views on economics, which the Jesuits ironically, the early history of Austrian economics includes the Jesuits of the Salamanca school. So there's such great irony here, and it's not funny irony; it's sad, tragic, and diabolical irony. And I hope that we move beyond — as a culture, I hope we move beyond this straightjacket of speech codes. It's frightening. It's downright Orwellian. And another friend — I've not met him personally, but I read him a lot, and I've communicated with him privately sometimes, is Dr. Anthony Esolen, a brilliant Roman Catholic traditionalist scholar at Providence. And he's likewise taking a lot of heat for some of the brilliant things he writes in *Crisis* magazine.

I mean, people who disagree with us — Walter Block and I disagree with each other on some issues, and we debate, and at the end of the day we're friends. I don't understand why, and especially why Christian institutions, Jesuit institutions — I mean, the Jesuits of all people, they are scholars, you know? Why can't they be scholarly? Why can't they be Christian? Why can't they be intellectual? Why are they using their power to beat down honest inquiry? That is the stuff of the Soviet Union and of Nazi Germany. That is the stuff of concentration camps, and we really culturally need to deal with this before it becomes an episode in history that we will be shocked to read about — you know, that people 100 years from now will be shocked to read about what happened to Western civilization and American culture.

WOODS: It's funny that a lot of the critics of the Old Church will say, oh, before we had Vatican II, what a terrible, benighted, stupid institution it was, but now that we've opened the doors to the modern world how much fresh air there is, and all this crap nobody in his right mind could possibly believe.

BEANE: Right.

WOODS: But the irony is that there was vastly more intellectual diversity in those days. Like, when I think of the old-style Jesuits, people who were ordained years and years and years ago, when you met one of those, you met a sharp, sharp mind who was not afraid of debating any subject, wasn't going to cower, but was glad to have the opportunity to have an exchange of ideas. And I think of – for example, I know a guy who – he's deceased now – a guy named Father James Sadowsky, who was an old-style Jesuit. Extremely knowledgeable. Extremely knowledgeable. And he would discuss and debate with absolutely anyone, and yet by the time of his death, the Society of Jesus that had become so leftist that – well, I guess probably about – let's say ten years before his death, he was one of the people I sent my manuscript for the book *The Church and the Market* to, because I thought this guy's extremely smart, he knows everything to know about what I'm writing about, and if I make any mistakes he'll tell me. And he basically loved the book. He had a couple minor comments, and he loved it. But he would not allow me to mention him in the acknowledgements –

BEANE: Hmm. Wow.

WOODS: – because he said, look, I'm in a retirement home for Jesuits, and I'm done fighting. I don't want to spend the rest of my days fighting this stuff. So I had to keep it quiet until he died. I mean, that's –

BEANE: Wow.

WOODS: And so these are the people who are going to liberate us from the bad old days? It really is a case of the liberator being worse than the alleged oppressor.

BEANE: Yeah, it really is. I'll give you a happy irony, Tom, that I think you'll appreciate. I went to a Jesuit high school, and it was kind of in that post-Vatican II transition. It was late '70s, early '80s. And I learned to write from the Jesuits, so ironically they gave me the tools that I needed to write that letter to Loyola that you enjoyed so much.

WOODS: All right, well, they've slightly made up for educating Voltaire, I guess.

BEANE: (laughing) Right, right. No, but you're right about that, and it's not just a Roman Catholic thing either. We see it in Lutheranism, which, as we talked about earlier, has kind of fractured along the lines of the more traditionalist wing and the more politically accommodating wing. We see it all across Christianity, but certainly in Roman Catholicism. Roman Catholicism of course is the largest branch within the Christian Church, and so what happens in Rome affects everybody. And so some of the things that the pope has been saying I know has been extremely frustrating to traditionalist Roman Catholics and to us too, to us Lutherans. I mean, we admired

Pope Benedict XVI. He was a great theologian, a great writer, but the current pope is just – maybe some of it, to be charitable, some of it is lost in translation, but it seems like every time –

WOODS: No, no, no. That's way too charitable. I appreciate the effort, but it's misplaced.

BEANE: Well you know, every time he says something, all the handlers come out and have to reinterpret what he says. If you want to have a little bit of a laugh, Tom, you might want to link to this on your page. There's a Lutheran pastor named Hans Fiene who does this Lutheran sarcasm kind of site. I'll have to send you the link or you can Google it. But he does this skit called "Frank the Hippy Pope," and it is quite funny. I wouldn't say it's blasphemous. I mean, a lot of traditional Roman Catholics have laughed at it. So you might want to check it out; if you think it's worthwhile you might want to link to it. But it really does sum up how often the pope will say something that's utterly politically correct but contrary to Roman Catholic doctrine, and then his handlers have to come in after the fact and sort of massage it and try to make lemonade out of lemons. It's really very sad, and it's confusing, and the world needs right now, the world needs strong Christian confession and leadership. We don't need this kind of muddying of the waters. This is a crucial time I think in our civilization's history. And I'm also honored to see men like Anthony Esolen, men like yourself from Roman Catholicism and other great leaders across the board from Protestantism and Orthodoxy working together to promote our Christian truths and to stand up for Christian liberties – and all people's liberties. I mean, religious liberties are all liberties, and these things are coming under attack from the state, and I think a lot of people are starting to wake up to that.

WOODS: I'm certainly going to link at TomWoods.com/767 to an episode I did – I've done episodes on the economics of Pope Francis a couple of times, but I did a bonus episode of the show really on church politics and how Francis fits into that. I did it as a bonus episode, because it wasn't really connected to libertarianism per se, but a lot of people were asking for it, and I did it with Roger McCaffrey, who's an old hand in traditional Catholic circles.

And I find it to be frankly quite terrifying, and no, I don't think the guy can be explained away. It really is a horrifying, horrifying situation. And I think, you know, you talk about people who have to explain away his crazy statements, and what I keep saying is, you know, whoever at *L'Osservatore Romano* in the Vatican press office is massaging his words to make them sound reasonable, why don't we just cut out the middle man and make that guy the pope? Wouldn't we save ourselves a lot of trouble? Just make that guy the pope. And really there's no question about it, that there are people who voted for Jorge Mario Bergoglio because they thought, okay, well, I heard he's for the poor and I like that, who now looking back on it are saying, what on earth did I do.

BEANE: Yeah.

WOODS: And he's about to add, oh, maybe close to two dozen voting cardinals, and they're going to be all – and again, he presents himself as, I'm the humble pope and I love everybody, unlike all my predecessors. I am humble and I love everybody. But if

John Paul II had run the Church the way Francis does there would never have been a Francis. Francis, it is absolute ideological conformity down the line, and I'm going to humiliate and demote you if you disagree.

On the other hand, Francis is about, it looks like he's reached an agreement with the highly traditionalist Society of Saint Pius X to reintegrate them into the Church, which is sort of a Nixon-to-China kind of thing. Nobody would expect that he would do it, and yet maybe he's the only one who could do it. So he's a very, very strange figure. Now I think I'm getting a little bit off the subject. We've got to talk more often, because there are a lot of things that you and I could talk about that I would enjoy talking to you on the phone about, but I think our phone conversations would make good episodes, so let's cut out the telephone middle man and just make them into episodes.

BEANE: Sounds great, yes.

WOODS: So tell people about your blog and how they can find it.

BEANE: Well, I have a blog. It's Blogspot. It's called Father Hollywood. There's an inside story of why it's called that. But basically I use it to put a sermon archive; I put my sermons up there. Of course I'm really far behind on posting them because I'm so busy, but I do have some political stuff and some libertarian stuff. I have been published on Lew Rockwell I think 12, 13 times, so if you go to LewRockwell.com you can plug in my name and you can read some of the things that I've written more pertinent to libertarianism, economics, and with the tie in oftentimes to Christianity. So people can read stuff there. Mostly I just — I guess I'm too lazy. I use Facebook to kind of put out ideas. I probably shouldn't do that. I probably should reinvigorate my blog, so maybe I have incentive to do that now.

WOODS: There's just — even though it's tempting to use Facebook because it seems like you get more engagement, there's less permanence with it, and so that's the tricky part.

BEANE: That's true. Absolutely, yes.

WOODS: Well, anyway, of course I'd like to see any content from you regardless of where it appears, and I'm glad that I now have an episode with you. But we're just skating on the very surface of so much great stuff, so I hope you'll agree to come on in the future, and thanks for talking to me today.

BEANE: Thank you, Tom, and I can't tell you what a great honor it is to be here, and please keep up the great work. You're doing the Lord's work, and you're a great voice for human dignity and human freedom, and I'm honored to be on the show.

WOODS: Thank you very much.