



“Sessions, Order, and Justice”: A Memorandum from the Center for Public Theology at Wesley Theological Seminary, June 21, 2018

Attorney General Jeff Sessions last week cited “the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order.” White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders later reasserted that “[i]t is very biblical to enforce the law.”

Much ink and ire have already been spilled on this topic from church authorities, activists, and engaged laity. They have raised issues regarding the appropriate reading of Romans 13 in light of the larger text of the epistle and its social context, countervailing witnesses in the biblical canon on issues of migration, echoes from other moments of social crisis, and much more. This brief document only attempts to situate these comments from administration officials in long traditions of Christian – especially, though not exclusively, white Protestant – social thought. Those traditions have honored the vocation of social institutions to preserve order, but have too often done so by neglecting the integral relationship of order and justice.

From its inception, the church has had to wrestle with the fact that Christians have (at least!) a dual citizenship: by faith, in the reign of God; and by forms of human belonging, in political communities. On this question, there were no easy answers for the followers of a Messiah who counseled paying even unjust taxes and rejected the possibility of usurping political authority, but who was crucified by the sovereigns of his day.

We do well to remember the essential paradox expressed in the view of the authors of the New Testament: that God has ordained the powers of this world, including the government; that those powers have become corrupt, fallen, destructive, and unjust; and that God’s plans include their redemption and transformation. As Walter Wink wrote in *The Powers That Be*, to remember only God’s creative intentions for the powers leads to a blind conservatism; to live only the energy of resisting their fallen state engenders revolutionary violence that plays into their hands; to work only in the hope of their eventual redemption may tempt us to settle for a comfortable reformism. The church is called instead to hold the entire story together.

Dating back at least to Augustine of Hippo, many Christians have held that secular authority is necessary for the preservation of order in a fallen world. Left to their own devices, the strongest forces in a world marred by sin would threaten what measure of peace is achievable in life, especially the peace of the vulnerable and marginalized. This view was reaffirmed by the Protestant Reformers, particularly Martin Luther, who sought to ensure that his teaching of “the

freedom of a Christian” would not be misinterpreted to dissolve what he saw as the rightful authority of secular governments.

A theological regard for order has much to commend it: it is an achievement of a society to manage to govern itself by discourse, law, and convention, rather than by violent force. Great lights of the church such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw cause to show respect for political institutions even in their urgent resistance of injustice. Indeed, some measure of order is a necessary condition for the human flourishing that is the glory of God.

But prominent Christian traditions, especially white European and American Protestants, have demonstrated such a disproportionate preference for order over justice that, according to the resulting political theology, few injustices seem to merit serious attention. Whether because of fear of the consequences of change, or because of hopes cast beyond this world to a coming eschaton, or because of attachments and identities unrecognized for what they are by those who hold them, order has become, for many of us, the overriding good pursued by political communities. This has rendered many quarters of the church quiet, either intentionally or *de facto*, and faith inert with respect to the urgent social questions of our day.

One aspect of the great witness of 20th and 21st century liberation theologies – from Medellín to Harlem, across the formerly colonized world and in Washington – is that *injustice is itself a form of disorder*. It is plainly true that one cannot accurately represent the Gospel that Jesus preached, passed on by Peter, Paul, and the other disciples, without including at its center the restoration of right relationship that we call justice. But it also true, as theologians such as James Cone, Emilie Townes, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and many others have reminded the whole church time and again, that no nation may purchase order at the expense of injustice, for injustice itself strains and warps the relationships that characterize a stable and genuine society: the violence of the riot or the rebellion is woven together with the established violence of unjust social orders. Those who attempt to insure domestic tranquility without also striving to establish justice will have *neither* order nor justice.

Sessions’ reading of Romans 13 is consistent with elements of the Christian traditions he has received: he is not the first so to use this passage, and he is unlikely to be the last. The comprehensive witness of the church, however, insists that Romans 13 be read in conversation with Revelation 13, a vision of the state as the great enemy of God, from which God will deliver those who keep their souls intact. It requires us to read Romans 13 as the courageous counsel of one imprisoned by the Roman Empire, part and parcel of the vocation to love even one’s enemies. That witness, which has energized Christians from Augustine to King and beyond to declare that “an unjust law is not a law,” requires the kind of discernment developed in broad conversations about social power and our aspirations for life together, and not unconditional deference to those in authority.

The Center for Public Theology is a non-partisan resource of Wesley Seminary dedicated to connecting the public witness of the church to theological and ethical resources for the sake of enriching public discourse.