The Use of Romans 13

Colleagues,

I have opined a few times, most recently three weeks ago, that I find ungodliness ensconced in the Oval Office these days. On each occasion I've gotten a rebuking counter-response from one or more readers. Hence this bit of essential introduction:

Our vocation as citizens with opinions to vent and votes to cast entails a peril that no one to my knowledge is naming in today's America. St. Paul spits it out in Romans 2:1: "You have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things." This is the reality that every person who reads today's piece is about to experience, and by no means for the first time since the sun came up this morning. I read the paper. I scanned the Facebook or Twitter feed. I'm nailed cold by the God whose laws of citizenry oblige me to judge what I'm reading and the sanity or decency of the people who churn it out. Come to think of it, there's a hidden mercy, perhaps, in my visceral disinclination to listen to Fox News, or in yours to avoid Rachal Maddow like the plague, if that's what you do. Thus does God keep us from doubling the Everest of judgment that already looms over each of our heads. I say this with tongue in cheek, of course. Said tongue returns to its proper place when I add the observation that we all need Christ, and desperately. With that, I trust, you'll all agree.

Counting on that agreement I forge ahead with today's project in which I pass along a piece I got a few days from Steven Kuhl. Steve put it together in connection with some duties for the Wisconsin Council of Churches. He thought that Crossings readers might want to see it too. While the presenting issue—the policy of separating children from parents at the U.S. southern

border—is not what it was two weeks ago or so when Steve wrote this, the problem he focuses on is still very much in place. That problem, as you'll see, is the use and abuse of Scripture, and specifically Romans 13. Steve is unabashed in passing judgment in the matter. He has no choice except to do that. Nor does anyone else. That includes those who wouldn't dream or dare to expose their judgments to public view. Adam is obliged to call the shots on what is good and what is evil, and Eve is too. That, at base, is what is sin is about. There's no escaping it. We sin even and perhaps especially in our best efforts to get God right and to love our neighbor as God requires.

"Trust me," says Christ, "and get on with the conversation. How else can you do what citizens must as they grope to discern God's will and do it?"

A quick note about Steve: he had triple-bypass surgery earlier this week, so please, pray for his good and strong recovery.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

On Romans 13 and the Immigration Crisis

by Steven Kuhl

As the Trump administration continues to demean immigrants and persist in its policy of separating children from parents as a strategy for punishing and deterring them from seeking asylum and assistance from the United States, the situation was made especially disconcerting to many Christians when the Attorney General, Jefferson Sessions, on June 14, invoked the Apostle Paul and his teaching on the State in Romans 13 as justification for this manifest injustice.

While the mainstream television and print media have been doing an admirable job of in-depth research into uncovering the social and political factors leading to this migration and the injustices being perpetrated by our governing authorities against these immigrants, little has been done in correcting the misinterpretation of Romans 13 and Christian teaching on the State.

To be sure, several "theological experts" have been interviewed by the media about Sessions' use of Romans 13. In general, they have rightly, emphatically, rejected it. (See, for example, this article from The Atlantic.) Indeed, to underscore just how objectionable Sessions' interpretation is, they tend to note how this kind of interpretation of Romans 13 has been used historically to justify other manifest injustices: by Britain to discredit the American Revolution, by the United States to justify slavery and malign the civil rights movement, by South Africa to justify apartheid, and by Nazi Germany to justify Nazi atrocities against the Jews, to mention a few. But no one, to my knowledge, has ventured a constructive, critical, theological reading of Paul's teaching in Roman 13 in order to show how it systematically contradicts Sessions' interpretation.

I would like here to try my hand at that. To that end, let me begin by giving the complete citation of Sessions' full "interpretation" of Romans 13, sparse though it be. Then, I'll focus on interpreting Romans 13 relative to it. Here is Sessions' statement.

"I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13 to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained the government for his purpose. Orderly and lawful processes are good in themselves. Consistent, fair application of law is in itself a good and moral thing and that protects the weak; it protects the lawful. Our policies that can

result in short-term separation of families are not unusual or unjustified….”

To be sure, there is not space here to give a comprehensive account of Paul’s teaching in Romans, let alone the Christian teaching, generally, on the role of the State in God’s divine providence. Therefore, in what follows I will focus on those aspects of the text that are necessary to correct the most obvious errors in the Attorney General’s misrepresentation and to point towards more faithful implications of how it might apply to the present context.

First, Christian teaching does affirm with Paul (Rom. 13:1) that all authority comes from God—whether it be of a spiritual nature (the authority to preach the gospel of the forgiveness of sins) or of a secular nature (the authority to administer the law of retribution to provide for the public welfare).

But, second, Paul also teaches that those who are given authority are not autonomous actors. They are always accountable to God and the purposes for which God gives them. In the case, here, of civil or governmental authorities that’s why Paul calls them “God’s servant[s] for good,” in Greek, *diakonia*. They serve at the pleasure of God and not in their own right. They serve for the common “good” of God’s whole creation and not their own interests.

Therefore, Mr. Sessions teaches falsely when he says “Orderly and lawful processes are good *in themselves*.” They are not! They are good only when they conform to the good purposes of God. The whole history of Israel—not to mention the world, when looked at through the lens of the prophets (see Isaiah 10) —is filled with examples of God revoking authority from leaders who have misused their authority for their purposes rather than God’s purposes. For an illuminating example of this, look at the recent Old

Testament lectionary reading for Pentecost 4, June 17, 2018, 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13): “The Lord was sorry he made Saul king” (15:35) and said to Samuel, “I have rejected [Saul] from being king over Israel” (16:1), and commanded Samuel to put into motion the “election” of a new king (cf. 16:6-13), even though Samuel knew Saul would kill him if he found out (16:2), which he didn’t by divine providence. Let those who have ears hear.

Third, while Paul does teach that the ordaining of secular authority is an expression of God’s wrath or anger (Rom. 1:18–3:20), i.e., the law, and not an expression of his mercy and forbearance, i.e., the gospel, that does not mean it is mean-spirited as the Trump policy against “illegals” suggests. But don’t be naive, it is an expression of God’s anger—God’s righteous anger—against injustice and unfairness or, as Paul says here, against “wrong doers” (Rom 13:4) or, as he says elsewhere, against the “ungodly.” This anger is analogous to the very same kind of anger felt by many of us when we are appalled by wrongdoing like that of the Trump administration. The difference is that God can express it without sin, we often cannot.

We must not forget that this angry word and activity of God against injustice is very different from God’s merciful activity of justifying the ungodly in Christ (Rom. 3:21–5:21). Therefore, there is a profound difference between “governmental authority” and “apostolic authority.” Even so, here Paul instructs Christians not only to leave room for God’s wrath, but to regard it with fear and for the sake of conscience (Rom. 4:5), to obey it when executed in accord with God’s purposes. Therefore, neither the Christian nor the secular ruler (who may or may not be a Christian) should presume that their wrongdoing is out of the reach of God’s wrath or the proper functioning of governmental authority. In this sinful age, no ruler is above the law, the very law they are to administer in service to God.

Fourth, Paul is very clear on what law-in-conformity-to-God's-will entails: "love" (cf. Rom. 13:8-10). Love for Paul is not a sentimental feeling but the giving of real help or protection to those in need. Love is the opposite of "wrong-doing." Moreover, the love-command applies not only to us as individuals, but also as a society, to the governing authorities. Paul describes what the law demands like this: "The commandments… are summed up in this word: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Rom. 13:9). "Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10). Obviously, then, as Bonhoeffer noted, the content of the law of God (that is, what specifically it means to love your neighbor in any given moment) is not a predetermined set rules that are established from the start, but the command of God in each moment to love our neighbors as ourselves. It is not a mystery, but something that is readily, reasonably, and contextually understandable to us because our neighbor's context informs what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves. We simply need to put ourselves in our neighbor's shoes and ask "what would we need?" The only thing that hinders love is our sin, which, for Paul, is our inclination to selfishness, to place self above, not on par with, our neighbor.

Shamefully, Sessions commits sin when he twists this clear teaching of Paul into its opposite by saying: "*fair application of law is in itself a good and moral thing and that protects the weak; it protects the lawful.*" What is twisted about this statement is the shamefully way it equates the "weak" with the "lawful," implying that the "weak" are lawful citizens of the U.S. who need protection from unfortunate, illegal migrants. This is selfishness, the very same kind of selfishness enshrined in the slogan "American First." Because of this selfishness Sessions twists Paul's teaching and deviously justifies separating the children of the illegals to protect the lawful citizens.

The rhetorical form of this sin is sophistry: speech designed to lie, deceive, and confuse. I know of no other word for his statement above. As his statement rightly says, the fair application of the law does demand that we protect the "weak," but in biblical terms that means those in need, those for whom life is unfair: the widow, the orphan, the oppressed, and, if you will, the "hebrew"—the word means "one from the other side [of the river]," the wandering stranger who has no place to call home or who, because of straitened or violent circumstances, has been driven away from their home. Therefore, contrary to what Sessions thinks, in the present circumstance, according to Paul's way of thinking, the "weak" are really those children (and their parents) who are torn away from their parents simply because they came to our border desperately seeking protection for their families. In truth, by Paul's way of thinking, these weak parents and children should rightly be called "the lawful" because they are the ones whom the law has, by the circumstances of history and divine providence, assigned to us to love, to help, the way the Good Samaritan was assigned, by the circumstances of the moment, to love and help the neighbor who had fallen onto evil/unfair times (Luke 10:25-37). Sessions, not to mention the whole Trump administration, is no different than the "lawyer" in that story who tried to "justify" ignoring the needs of the weak in his context.

Finally, then, since Mr. Sessions and the Trump Administration want to be seen as being faithful to Romans 13 and the biblical tradition concerning their duty before God as governing authorities, let them hear the Apostle Paul for what he is actually saying and to create policies that are consistent with it. Let Christians and people of good will urge them to work in a non-partisan, non-selfish way to create policies that reflect the purposes for which God placed them in their governmental offices in the first place: to help and protect the weak, those

for whom life has been unfair, like these wandering parents and children seeking asylum. If need be, raise taxes to pay for this purpose. For Paul himself says the governing authority have the right to raise taxes on those of us who are more fortunate precisely so that it might be “busy with this very thing” (Rom. 13:6).

As the church, it is our duty to interpret and proclaim the Word of God as it relates to the circumstances of our time. When that word is publicly perverted, as it has been by Sessions, it is our duty to counter it publicly. As citizens of this democratic republic, it is our duty to exercise the governing authority we have been given. That entails not only obeying the governing authorities, but holding them accountable through both formal (the vote) and informal means (protest). As Christian citizens we pray for our civic leaders even as we criticize them for their wrongdoings and we pray for ourselves that we might be delivered from our own selfishness by the grace of God to heed God’s command to “love our neighbors as ourselves.”