

How Jeff Sessions reads Romans 13 and how my Mennonite Sunday school class does

In the hands of coercive power, the Bible is a weapon.

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Attorney General Jeff Sessions. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Gage Skidmore](#).

My Sunday school class was abuzz with intrigue and investigative insight. We spent the quarter in Paul's letter to the Romans, an exercise in cross-cultural and theological study.

But when we got to Romans 13 the rooms felt different, still and confused.

We're Anabaptists, Mennonites who are descendants of an illegal breakaway from the Catholic Church. Early Anabaptists were hunted down, drowned, tortured, and burned for the anti-government action of baptizing one another upon confession of faith in Jesus Christ. This was a political act, one that defied the authorities of the day.

So what do we make of [Attorney General Jeff Sessions citing Romans 13 as an argument for separating parents from children at the U.S.-Mexico border?](#)

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities,” writes Paul, “for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom. 13:1). He goes on to say that rulers are not a terror for those who do good works but only for those whose works are rooted in evil.

It is one of the strangest assertions in the Bible. By the time Paul writes this he has experienced hostility from all sorts of authorities. He has been threatened and imprisoned for breaking the law. Eventually he will die for these legal transgressions.

My Sunday school class talked through these strange contradictions. Perhaps this was a way to reiterate that God is in control of everything. Human institutions are no exception. In this reading Paul is telling the church in Rome that Caesar, with his claims of divinity, is no more than a puppet with God pulling the strings.

Or perhaps this was a warning against religious zealotry developing in the city of Rome, “enthusiasts” who refused to pay taxes on principle. Paul’s words could be a reminder that, in the words of Ernst Kasemann, “the political sphere is certainly provisional. But only enthusiasts fail to see that our worship is to be accomplished in provisional things by doing what has to be done in the given situation.”

Or perhaps we should give attention to a popular Mennonite theological claim that Romans 13 is to be read in conjunction with Romans 12. This previous chapter speaks to the character of the beloved community, the forms life will take within God’s life in Jesus. The call in Romans 13 is to live this Romans 12 life in “submission,” but never in obedience. It may be incumbent upon our witness to the gospel to participate in a sit-in protesting unjust laws, but we submit to the arrest we know will take place.

Or perhaps Paul was involved in a smuggling operation, saying in Romans 13 the correct words that would allow his letter to successfully make its way through the empire’s checkpoints between Corinth and Rome. James Scott calls this ancient technique a “hidden transcript.” The internal orientation of the readers determines the interpretation. External readers see only what they want to see.

I’m grateful for the exegetical work that helps to make sense of this odd chapter of Paul’s letter to Rome. On some days I am more convinced by one of these approaches than by others.

But I am certain of this: the Bible is a weapon in the hands of coercive power. Jeff Sessions, like other tyrants before him, utilizes scripture for the good of the empire, to keep people silent, in line, submissive.

As I looked around my Sunday school class on the day we studied Romans 13, I saw the people for whom these words were written down. A woman who escaped religious persecution in Russia as an infant, boarding a ship with no destination. A man who watches his daughter struggle through mental illness and addiction. A widow who nursed her husband through a slow death from cancer. Two doctors who have spent their careers working at clinics for indigent patients.

In that circle, within those stories, welling up from those lives—that is where biblical interpretation is meant to take place. That is how the words of the Bible will be intelligible in the face of the questions and catastrophes of this day, of this time. And it is out of these interpretive communities that the violent powers of Jeff Sessions and those like him are coming, ever slowly, to an end.