

## *On the Misuse of Scripture to Justify Injustice*

A Statement by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, June 2018



LaSagrada Familia, By Kelly Latimore

As the crisis surrounding immigration continues to unfold, we, the members of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, raise our voices in protest at the policies being implemented and at the inappropriate appeal to scripture by government officials in support of these policies.

With a signed Executive Order instructing the indefinite detention of families, the reunification of children separated from their parents unlikely to occur, and National Guard troops from Wisconsin being sent to support ICE activities along the border, it is clear that our government intends to continue using its authority in ways that perpetrate trauma.

We, the members of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, have covenanted “to pray and work together for the unity and renewal of the church and the healing and reconciliation of the world.” That means, whenever possible, we will strive to give clear expression to the Christian faith that unites us, especially when that faith has been publicly perverted or maligned, and stand with the weak and powerless when they are being exploited, maltreated or neglected – especially by those who are officially responsible for the public welfare.

We are especially concerned with the Attorney General’s appeal to scripture to support the policy of separating parents from their children, and by extension, the indefinite detention of undocumented immigrants and the rejection of asylum seekers.

The Attorney General appeals to Paul’s statement in Romans 13:1: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.”

**We reject this theological misrepresentation of Scripture, specifically, and of Christian teaching about the State, generally, in justification of such obvious injustice.**

This verse has been used in many contexts: by Nazis demanding that Christians submit to and participate in the genocide of Jews; by South African Christians defending the injustice of Apartheid; by American Christians defending the institution of slavery. The historical echoes are profoundly disturbing and we call the church and society to attend, that the past not be repeated.

The Apostle Paul, author of these words, was himself imprisoned and executed by the Roman Empire. He wrote this sentence in a larger context, in a letter written to Christians in Rome, who were an illicit community and in danger of persecution. He wrote it as part of a larger argument that includes not only his insistence that governmental authority is ordained by God but that such authority has its limits.

Paul asserts that there is a higher law, a higher principle to which any government, any human community, any human is subject: “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10).

**We declare that our common Christian witness is imperiled by inauthentic Christian teaching in the public square, and the church’s own limited, episodic responses to injustice. When Christian teaching is perverted by those in governance and that twisting of scripture is allowed by the Christian community, we stand in a dangerous place.**

Throughout Hebrew and Christian scripture, there is an understanding that all human authority is subject to divine judgment and justice; that laws are just only to the extent that they conform to divine justice. The Hebrew prophets railed against the injustices of kings and societies that ignored the plight of the poor, of widows and orphans, of strangers and aliens.

It is not only the government which bears responsibility for a just society; the voice of the people addressing their government, the witness of the Church and its prophetic voice offered in encouragement and admonition must not be absent. We must not only speak a Word into these perilous times, but be ready to act, as well. We pray for the guidance of the Spirit that our words and actions may be true.

The criminalization and detention of undocumented immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers is manifestly unjust. As Christians, we cannot stand by idly; we cannot remain silent in the face of injustice and oppression.

We call on the churches and their pastoral leadership to remain steadfast and bold, both in Christian teaching and public witness, that misrepresentations of Scripture not be allowed to stand.

We call on the members of our congregations, lawmakers, and people of good will to rise up in protest against this injustice, to ensure that people seeking asylum, refugees, immigrants hoping to make a better life for themselves and their families, be welcomed, embraced, and allowed to help make this a better, more inclusive and diverse, stronger nation.

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