

“Our Legacy and Our Calling”
Exodus 5:1-9/Romans 13:1-10

The Apostle Paul was in the news recently. That doesn't happen very often, but did occur about two weeks ago when Jeff Sessions, the U.S. Attorney General spoke to an audience in Fort Wayne, Indiana. His remarks came amidst a national debate over the separation of children from their asylum-seeking parents when as part of his speech Mr. Sessions said “Illegal entry into the United States is a crime—as it should be. Persons who violate the law of our nation are subject to prosecution. I would cite you 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.”

The Biblical message he had in mind comes from the New Testament lesson we just read. It's a part of Scripture that I suspect has been debated by believers ever since it was first heard and yet verses I have never used as a sermon text before. Thus, given how Mr. Sessions brought that passage into public discourse and how later this week our nation will mark its 242nd birthday, I thought it an appropriate time for us to ponder Paul's words for insights they can provide about the connection between the individual Christian and her or his government.

It was in the thirteenth chapter of his letter to Christians in Rome that Paul urged support. “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities,” he says “for there is no authority except from God and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.” While his message would have come as a surprise to Roman emperors who viewed themselves as deities, Paul wanted those first-century Christians to be clear about the place of good government. “Therefore whoever resists authority, resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.”

In those verses, Paul is making explicit what we know to be true; that government has an essential role to play in life. Elected officials and all of the supporting agencies and employees provide order and protection, furtherance of the common good and the enactment of justice. Good government is key and Paul is declaring that word even to people who had no say in their leaders as he goes on to tell Christians they have a financial responsibility, too. “For the same reason, you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.” Thus, he urges believers to obey the law.

The challenge, of course, has always been one of knowing how widespread Paul intended that command to be and the connection between human and divine authority. Did he mean those words only for that moment in time or did he intend to speak of all governments? We don't know. Paul was a Roman citizen and that fact saved him more than once from trouble with the authorities who didn't like that crowds were responding to his preaching about Jesus. Yet Rome ultimately took his life, too, and history is filled with countless other occasions when tyrants and dictators have carried out horrible things against their people which we appropriately reject as having been God's will. Thus as people of faith, we can naturally wonder what Paul's words have to say to us still as Christians in 21st century America.

John Fea, a professor of American history at Messiah College in Mechanicsburg, PA notes that “There are two dominant places in American history when Romans 13 is invoked. One is during the American Revolution [when] it was invoked by loyalists, those who opposed the [fight for independence].” The other is “in the 1840s and 1850s when Romans 13 is invoked by defenders of the South or defenders of slavery to ward off abolitionists who believe that slavery is wrong.” (Zauzmer, Julie and Keith McMillan “Jeff Sessions cites Romans 13, a Bible passage

used to defend slavery, in defense of family separations.” *The Washington Post*, June 14, 2016) Two of the documents in our denomination’s *Book of Confessions*—the Barmen Declaration and Confession of Belhar--arose in response to other times when Christians were using Romans 13 to argue for support of their government, too, in the first case during the rise of Nazism and in the latter, when forces were moving against apartheid in South Africa. Thus, there is appropriate caution for us in taking Paul’s words at face value or following them without thought.

Our Old Testament lesson recounts the first time a person of faith spoke truth to power. It came when the Israelites were slaves in ancient Egypt and Moses was chosen by God to lead the people to freedom. Our passage recalls the moment Moses and his brother go to Pharaoh and boldly declare “Thus say the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.’” It was a direct word to the head of the Egyptian government, but, of course, he did not immediately agree. “Who is the LORD,” the Pharaoh retorts “that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go.” Instead, things get worse as Pharaoh decrees that his slaves will have to collect their own straw for use in making the bricks required of them, but that their production quota could not drop. It took many more visits by Moses and a succession of plagues from God before the Israelites were set free, yet that scene began a pattern of faithful challenges to government.

For when King David had an affair with Bathsheba and killed her husband to hide his deed, it was the prophet Nathan who went to his sovereign and called him to task. When a succession of Jewish kings in Judah and Israel failed to ensure justice for the people, a series of prophets went to them to speak of God’s way. When Jesus, during his final hours, stood before Pilate and refused to answer his questions, the Roman prefect declared “Do you not know that I have the power to release you, and the power to crucify you?” and Jesus replied “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.”

There has always been this complicated relationship between God’s intention and human leadership; between our respecting earthly authority, but honoring first the maker of heaven and earth. Paul, too, acknowledged that tension for directly after speaking of how we are to support the government and pay taxes, he goes on to declare a summary of the law. “Owe no one anything,” he says “except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law... Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

As Christians living in the United States that is to be the basis of how live and act upon the faith we have professed in Jesus Christ, too. For God is concerned about what we do in and through the church, yet God is also concerned about what occurs in our homes and places of work, in our neighborhoods and schools, in our hospitals and care facilities, in our courts and yes, in our government. God is concerned about all of those aspects of human existence because God is sovereign over them all which means that as followers of Jesus our concern is to be just as broad as we love one another. That is part of our heritage and it goes back centuries.

Several years ago Don Sweeting, President of Colorado Christian University wrote an article about the role of Presbyterians in the American Revolution. I did not check his sources and thus you are free to wonder about some of the facts he cites, but I share it as he wrote it.

He begins by recalling one American colonist loyal to King George who wrote to friends in England about the unrest on this side of the Atlantic and said “I fix all the blame of these extraordinary proceedings upon the Presbyterians.’ Around the same time,” Sweeting goes on “Horace Walpole spoke from the English House of Commons to report on these ‘extraordinary proceedings’ in the colonies of the new world. “There is no good crying about the matter,” he said “Cousin America has run off with the Presbyterian parson, and that is the end of it.” The

parson of which he spoke was John Witherspoon—a Presbyterian minister, as well as a descendant of John Knox. At the time Witherspoon was president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton). He was also the only clergyperson to sign the Declaration of Independence. From the English perspective,” Sweeting said, “the American Revolution was often perceived as a Presbyterian rebellion and its supporters were often disdained as ‘those blasted Presbyterians.’”

Another historian illuminated why those labels were used. “When Cornwallis was driven back to ultimate retreat and surrender,” Paul Carson writes “all of the colonels of the Colonial Army, but one were Presbyterian elders. It is estimated that more than one half of all the soldiers and officers of the American Army during the Revolution were Presbyterian. Presbyterian clergy joined the cause,” Carson went on. “It was said that many of them led the Revolution from the pulpit. In doing so, they paid a heavy price for their support for independence. Many lost family members or their own lives. Some had their churches burned to the ground.”

The reasons for such actions could be found in their faith. “There was a belief in the absolute sovereignty of God,” Sweeting noted. “God alone is the Lord of all and the author of liberty. There was a corresponding belief in the absolute equality of individuals (king and peasant, clergy and laity) under God’s law. There was the belief that no human should be entrusted with absolute power, given our radically fallen human nature... And because of their experience in England, there was a belief that religious freedom and freedom of conscience should be respected. In other words, for these Presbyterians, liberty is affirmed, but it is not an absolute liberty. It is always to be lived out under the sovereign creator God. It was this theology” Sweeting contends “which ultimately gave the colonialist the will to resist.”

(Sweeting, Don “Those Blasted Presbyterians: Reflections on Independence Day,”

<http://donsweetig.com/> 2014/07/04)

That is our heritage. How we go about acting upon it today will certainly vary as it will be rare when all Presbyterians agree about what governmental policies are best, but what is not debatable is that our starting point in the fullness of life is to be the teachings of Jesus Christ; the One we have vowed to follow in word and deed. And to do so precisely because we know that the Declaration of Independence had it right in declaring “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and endowed *by their Creator* with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Thus, as Christians in America we are to be engaged in the messy work of making a “more perfect union,” that it might reflect ever more completely a nation that is “under God.”