

Jim Wallis: His Flawed Arguments on the Shutdown, Bible and Justice

The Bible is not a Rorschach block to which anyone, including Jim Wallis, can bring whatever interpretation he or she wishes.

The text of Scripture has objective meaning with myriad applications. This is distinct from the idea that the biblical texts can be reinterpreted according to individual or cultural preferences. This historic hermeneutical principle is as old as biblical commentary itself.

It is thus with concern that Wallis is now using the preeminent New Testament text on the role of the state as a pretext for calling the current partial shutdown of some federal agencies and services “unbiblical.”

That text is Romans 13:1-7, the New Testament’s most extensive teaching on the role of secular government and the Christian’s relationship to it. Here is the text in full:

“Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for

conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor" (NASB).

Peter makes the same points as his fellow apostle Paul, only more briefly:

"Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men—as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king" (1 Pet. 2:13-17, NKJV).

Both Catholic and Protestant interpretations of these passages have been essentially consistent: The role of the state is to protect the just and punish wrongdoers and thereby provide society with a safe, stable environment. Christians are required to obey the authorities, show them respect and pay what they owe in taxes and duties.

Here is a sampling of the consensus interpretation of Romans 13:1-7 from respected Catholic (the first two) and Protestant (the second two) sources:

- The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: "Believers who render obedience to the governing authorities are obeying the one who is highest in command. At the same time, it is recognized that Caesar has the responsibility to make just ordinances and to commend uprightness."
- Tony Listi on Conservative Colloquium: "Legitimate governmental authority is established by God for the

purpose of justice, to punish those who commit evil acts. Thus the Christian should obey such authority not merely out of fear of earthly wrath but out of fear of divine wrath and out of love for God. However, if a government ceases to be 'devoting themselves' to the public good and to punishing evil acts, that government ceases to be a servant/minister of God and thus ceases to have authority from Him. When the law is perverted such that it no longer punishes evil but it itself becomes an instrument to inflict evil, then that government no longer possesses God-given authority."

- John M. Frame: "God's people ... ought to be good citizens. They ought to pay taxes, they ought to vote, they ought to perform all civic duties. ... We need government to restrain sin in this world and to defend the righteous. Government won't save anyone, but that's not government's job. We support government, not because it is savior, but because our God, our Savior, has ordained it for our good."
- Ligonier Ministries, the teaching fellowship of R.C. Sproul: "Romans 13 offers perhaps the most thorough summary of the state's vocation in Scripture. Paul explains that the civil magistrate 'does not bear the sword in vain' against evildoers; that is, God has delegated to the state the right to use force in order to execute divine wrath upon criminals on this side of glory. Government is called to use the sword to punish evil and to promote the cause of righteousness in society. This includes such things as establishing the police and legal authorities in order to protect innocent victims from crime and adjudicate offenders. Also, the state may wage defensive wars when it faces geopolitical aggressors. The Lord entrusts these responsibilities to the state and not the church, which is why force is never acceptable as a means of evangelization. Moreover, the state's right to exercise force has limitations. The government uses force

unlawfully if it wields the sword to promote unrighteousness in society.”

The agreement is clear: According to Romans 13, government’s role is that of protector of the just and punisher of those who do evil. To exposit from this text that government is to be a provider is *eisegesis*, “the act imposing meaning onto a text and is often described in terms of reading ‘into’ the text rather than ‘out of’ it.”

It is thus with great concern that Jim Wallis, perhaps the leading champion of the American evangelical left, now uses this seminal text to justify his view that the state should be the implementer of biblical charity through coercive redistribution. Here’s a recent comment to this end:

“The biblical purpose of government is to protect from evil and to promote the good—protect and promote. Government is meant to protect its people’s safety, security and peace, and promote the common good of a society—and even collect taxes for those purposes. Read Romans 13 by the apostle Paul and other similar texts. The Scriptures also make it clear that governmental authority is responsible for fairness and justice and particularly responsible to protect the poor and vulnerable.

“Read Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah, the Psalms, and even the book of Kings to see that God will judge kings and rulers (governments) for how they treat the poor. And it wasn’t just the kings of Israel who were held accountable for the poor, but also the kings of neighboring countries—all governments. That’s what the Bible says; so let me be as clear as I can be.”

At first blush, Wallis sounds almost like a conservative: He uses terms like *safety* and *security* to describe the role of the state, although he avoids the means by which such are derived (Paul uses the term *the sword*; the Greek word refers

to a weapon used for cutting or thrusting—you get the idea it might hurt). This is not unsurprising, given his long history as a pacifist.

A careful reading of Wallis' comments, however, shows that he conflates Romans 13's description of the duties of the secular state with the warnings of the ancient Jewish prophets against theocratic Israel, in which the law of God was also the law of the civil government. Most Americans, and certainly most Christians, would be troubled by the notion that the government should enforce God's law; while religious conviction can and should animate Christian action in the public square, the institutions of church and state are separate. Wallis apparently has a decidedly different view.

It is indisputable that the role of the state is to promote justice and security, but the idea that the secular government is to assume theocratic Israel's responsibility to provide for the needs of its people is astounding.

Evidently, unable to find in the New Testament any justification for government as a distributor of income or goods or services, Wallis willingly becomes a "dominionist" or "theonomist"—he wants to apply the Mosaic code to contemporary America.

The irony is almost too great: Wallis, who often has accused the Christian right of identifying America with God's kingdom (when the Christian right has done this, it has been wrong), now uses the Old Testament prophets' exhortations to ancient Israel concerning that unique theo-state's failure to provide for the poor as a basis for saying, "Government is accountable for the poor."

As remarkable is the context of Wallis' statement about the role of government: the shutdown of the government, which Wallis asserts is "unbiblical."

Of course one of the purposes of the state is justice, and

Scripture is indeed replete with myriad references that speak of the state's duty to protect the vulnerable and weak (does this not include the most vulnerable, the unborn within the womb?). Yet the purpose of the state is not to take income from one group and give it to another. That's called theft, something condemned by God from Genesis to Revelation.

The duty of government to be just and foster justice means that it must protect those in need from exploitation and ensure that the law favors no group or individual over another. Justice does not mean coercive charity—the state seizing resources from an individual or private corporation and doling them out to a more favored group. Yet with respect to the current partial shutdown of various federal agencies and services, Wallis seems to argue for exactly this. He says:

“Pressuring the nation to shut down the government, instead of keeping debate within the political process, is contrary not only to our best political traditions, but also to what our Scriptures say. And underlying this current crisis, there is a clear hostility to government itself, government per se, from a group of political extremists that I believe is unbiblical. ... Already, thousands of children are losing their Head Start programs, mothers with children are losing WIC [Women, Infants, and Children program], and many of those most dependent on their paychecks are now losing them.”

Wallis asserts that some are “pressuring the nation” to shut down the government. He's been in Washington for more than three decades—he knows better. No one enjoys the current impasse over spending, the president's health care plan, etc., but to suggest that some are taking the stances they are because they oppose government qua government is silly. And Wallis knows it.

More pertinently, let us grant that the curtailment of federal services and benefits to those in need is hard for those who receive them—hard, frightening and sudden. No one who has a

hungry child or a mortgage payment or a paycheck-to-paycheck job and relies on federal aid or a federal job to make these ends meet should be taken for granted or crudely dismissed as mere excess fiscal baggage. These are people, our fellow citizens, and the church should be at the forefront of doing all it can to help those truly at risk.

Also, having served on the staff of some of those Wallis probably has in mind—conservative Republicans—and having met unnumbered elected or appointed conservative leaders, I know of none who rubs his hands with glee over the prospect of making needy Americans struggle to put food on the table. Whatever the wisdom of the shutdown, it is not motivated by a desire to make anyone suffer. Wallis, in asserting this, is exercising a moral judgment for which he has no legitimate factual or logical foundation.

At the same time, philosophically, Christians should affirm, commensurate with the teachings of Scripture, that it is not the government's job to provide for the needs of the poor by:

- Breaching constitutional limits on the federal government's role (the Constitution, not Moses' rules for gleaning or the year of Jubilee, is the law of the land);
- Taking from one group of citizens and giving their resources to another group (this is intrinsically unjust); or
- Sustaining a system or dependence on the state which is, as Franklin Roosevelt termed it in his second inaugural address, "a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit."

The state's duty is not to function as a parent, a nurturer or a surrogate spouse. It is to serve, do justice, protect and punish. That's what the New Testament says.

Jim Wallis has a point of view; he's free to have it and

express it, thanks in large part to the sacrifices of the military he has so often disparaged. But as an American, that right is sacrosanct.

What he lacks is sound theology. For him to use the Bible to make absurd claims is irreverent and dangerous. He knows better.

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