



## 'Suffer the Little Children'

The separation of immigrant children from their parents is not biblical.

**T**he abuse of scripture by officials of the Trump administration—claiming that separating immigrant children from their parents is “biblical”—must be named by faith leaders not only as morally wrong for any decent society but also as an *unbiblical* sacrilege that is cruelly contrary to the love of Jesus Christ, who says how we treat the “stranger” is how we treat Jesus (Matthew 25:31-46).

The tearing of children, including infants and toddlers, away from their mothers and fathers and putting them into “detention centers” is a form of child abuse and will cause irreparable harm. This is not “biblical” law enforcement, but rather is directly contradictory to every teaching of Jesus Christ, whom we are called to reclaim in this critical time of American history.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions and White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, speaking for the president, quoted Romans 13 to justify this policy of cruelty against children and families. This is a clear misuse and violation of the Word of God to defend a morally indefensible policy. This is a line of demarcation that political power must not be allowed to cross.

The apostle Paul, in Romans 13, does *not* say that cruelty is a justifiable tool or role of government. Rather, Paul says the government’s role is meant to be “God’s servant for your good”; government exists to be the protector of the good and to guard people from evil. Romans 13:3 says, “For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.” In cruel contrast, the new family-destroying policies of the administration are the reverse of the proper role of government described in Romans 13: These actions by



our government are a *terror* to families and an infliction of *evil* on children.

These family separation policies are directly contrary to the test of love laid out later in the same chapter of Romans (verses 8-10):

*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this Word: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*

Paul tells us to evaluate everything he says by the teaching of his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If Jesus is Lord, we are called to love our neighbors in every circumstance, and even to love our enemies. In Matthew 22, Jesus puts loving God and loving your neighbor at the heart of everything. “On these

two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” In Matthew 25, Jesus commands us to welcome the stranger.

Falsely using a biblical text as a pretext for stealing children from their parents is what former Trump religious adviser Rev. A.R. Bernard calls an “atrocious.” The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops proclaimed that “separating babies from their mothers is not the answer and is immoral.” The bishops continued: “At its core, asylum is an instrument to preserve the right to life ... Families are the fundamental element of our society and they must be able to stay together.” Cardinal Sean O’Malley charged that Christians must speak up: “I cannot be silent when our country’s immigration policy destroys families, traumatizes parents, and terrorizes children.” A letter from the National Association of Evangelicals called the “traumatic effects” of separating families “devastating,” “long-lasting,” and “of utmost concern.”



# As followers of Jesus, these are not just political issues. They are matters of discipleship.

It is important that we remember times when Romans 13 has been misused and abused before. The founding of America included auction blocks where African children were torn from their parents as divided families were sold as property to slaveholders. Romans 13 was used to support the Fugitive Slave Act, requiring the return of runaway slaves to their owners, and to defend the whole legal system of racialized slavery. We must also remember that for hundreds of years, under U.S. and state laws, children of Native Americans were routinely separated from their parents.

Separating children from their parents is *not* a mandate of current U.S. law, but rather a deliberate policy choice this administration is making to use cruelty as a deterrent, and some administration officials have admitted it. The truth is that the administration could stop ripping families apart tomorrow—and we must call upon the president to do just that.

While we still need comprehensive, compassionate, and just immigration reform, we must now call on Congress to pass a simple legislative act that would prohibit the administration from separating families.

For followers of Jesus, these are not just political issues but matters of discipleship. As elders, we have committed ourselves to “Reclaiming Jesus” as an urgent call in a time of crisis. We

believe that reclaiming Jesus requires us to believe in welcoming the stranger and to reject the policies and practices that separate immigrant children from their mothers and fathers.

The government is meant to be by the people and for the people: Do not separate children from their parents in our names, and certainly not in the name of Jesus! Do not misuse the Bible! This is our government, elected to conduct the affairs of the American people in keeping with our values, and we value families. We value children.

## We call upon the administration to do three things:

1. Immediately stop separating children from their parents.
2. Ensure that no children who have already been separated from their parents are lost.
3. Immediately begin reuniting families torn apart by the U.S. government.

## We call upon followers of Jesus to act in three ways:

1. **Take this matter to our churches.** Read the scriptures for what they really say, then pray, reflect, and act to protect these children. Preach the gospel on these biblical issues regarding the “strangers” and their children in our midst. Form study and prayer groups of concern and action in our local

churches. Raise these issues in our local communities, using our churches as a base.

2. **Take our candlelight prayers to the streets,** to offices of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in Washington, D.C., and in our local communities, to the White House, to the U.S. Capitol, and to the district offices of members of Congress. Pray and bear witness with pastors and faith leaders at the detention centers where children are being held.

3. **Prayerfully consider nonviolent civil disobedience,** or “holy obedience,” at appropriate places, as an act of love and in the spirit of love, standing for children and families and against the immoral act of separating children from their families.

**T**he teaching of Jesus Christ is clear and incontrovertible. And our moral duty in this moment is likewise.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:37-40)

We offer this call in prayer and hope for the reclaiming of Jesus in our time. ■

**Signed:** Bishop Carroll A. Baltimore, President and CEO, Global Alliance Interfaith Network; Dr. Amos Brown, Chair, Social Justice Commission, National Baptist Convention USA, Inc.; Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann, Professor Emeritus, Columbia Theological Seminary; Dr. Tony Campolo, Co-Founder, Red Letter Christians; Dr. Iva Carruthers, General Secretary, Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference; The Most Rev. Michael B. Curry, Presiding Bishop and Primate, The Episcopal Church; Rev. Dr. James Forbes, President and Founder, Healing of the Nations Foundation and Preaching Professor at Union Theological Seminary; Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, General Secretary Emeritus, Reformed Church in America; Rev. Dr. Cynthia Hale, Senior Pastor, Ray of Hope Christian Church, Decatur, GA; Rev. Dr. Richard Hamm, former General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); Rev. Dr. Joel C. Hunter, Faith Community Organizer and Chairman, Community Resource Network; Rev. Dr. Jo Anne Lyon, General Superintendent Emerita, The Wesleyan Church; Bishop Vashti McKenzie, 117th Elected and Consecrated Bishop, AME Church; Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, Jr., Co-Convenor National African American Clergy Network; Dr. John Perkins, Chair Emeritus and Founding Member, Christian Community Development Association and President Emeritus, John & Vera Mae Perkins Foundation; Senior Bishop Lawrence Reddick, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church; Rev. Ray Rivera, President and Founder, Latino Pastoral Action Center; Fr. Richard Rohr, Founder, Center for Action and Contemplation; Dr. Ron Sider, President Emeritus, Evangelicals for Social Action; Rev. Jim Wallis, President and Founder, Sojourners; Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins, Director, NCC Truth and Racial Justice Initiative; Dr. Barbara Williams-Skinner, Co-Convenor, National African American Clergy Network; President, Skinner Leadership Institute; Bishop Will Willimon, Bishop, The United Methodist Church, retired, Professor of the Practice of Ministry, Duke Divinity School.