News



U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions addresses reporters during a news conference at the Moakley Federal Building in Boston on July 26, 2018. (AP/Charles Krupa)

Jack Jenkins

View Author Profile

Religion News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

November 8, 2018

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Methodists asked Jeff Sessions to repent. He resigned instead.

Sessions stepped down Nov. 7 as U.S. attorney general, ending a tenure marked by near-constant pushback from faith communities across the religious spectrum who opposed his policies and his attempts to defend them with Scripture.

He reportedly resigned at the request of President Trump, who has voiced frustration with Sessions since he recused himself early last year from the ongoing Department of Justice investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election, citing his work on Trumps campaign.

"I have been honored to serve as Attorney General and have worked to implement the law enforcement agenda based on the rule of law that formed a central part of your campaign for the presidency," read the closing line of Sessions resignation letter to Trump.

Trump tweeted that Sessions chief of staff, Matthew Whitaker, would serve as acting attorney general for now, thanked Sessions for his service and wished him well.

Sessions brought a concern for religious freedom to the job, and a passion for quoting the Bible that few recent attorneys general have, but it often backfired on him. In fact, Sessions is unlikely to be missed by a wide array of religious groups and leaders — including some supportive of Trump.

Pushback and protest from faith groups dogged Sessions from the moment he was tapped for the job. Shortly after President Trump announced he would nominate the former Alabama senator for attorney general, progressive religious leaders such as the Rev. William Barber II held rallies in opposition to his nomination.

"Sessions immoral record shows consistent support for ideological extremism, racist and classist policies, and the writing of discrimination into law," Barber said in January 2017.

Tensions increased when Sessions helped implement the Trump administrations "zero-tolerance" policy that led to the separation of families along the U.S.-Mexico border, sparking outcry from various faith communities. Among other groups, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops condemned the policy, and one bishop

suggested "canonical penalties" for Catholics who participate in it.

Sessions fed the controversy when he spoke directly to his "church friends" in a speech, attempting to justify the policy and give faith-based critics a Bible lesson by citing Romans 13 in Christian Scripture.

"I would cite you to 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," Sessions said. "Orderly and lawful processes are good in themselves and protect the weak and lawful."

Groups across the theological spectrum, including the leadership of entire denominations, issued statements blasting the policy, Sessions theological argument or both.

Advertisement

Soon thereafter, more than 600 Methodists signed a letter condemning the "zero-tolerance" policy and calling for official church charges against Sessions such as child abuse, immorality, racial discrimination and "dissemination of doctrines contrary to the standards of doctrine of the United Methodist Church."

The charges were eventually dismissed on a technicality — using a logic that confused some top Methodists — but frustration with Sessions persisted.

"Fundamentally, I hope that he will repent and believe the good news of liberation and hope proclaimed by the One he claims to follow," said University of Puget Sound chaplain Dave Wright, who helped draft the original letter charging Sessions, "and put renewed effort into doing the work of caring for those on the margins in his home congregation and community."

Wright had little faith that hell be more pleased with the person the president nominates to take Sessions spot. "The best I can hope for is that his successor somehow has a greater conscience for doing good to those who are oppressed and marginalized in this country and is willing to live that out in their public life."

Earlier this year, Sessions lifted up religious liberty as a central concern for the Department of Justice, announcing a "religious liberty task force," drawing more

criticism from faith leaders. Last week, Sessions began to deliver a speech in Boston about religious liberty but was interrupted by two ministers who stood up and began reciting a passage from the Gospel of Matthew concerning the treatment of "strangers."

"Brother Jeff, as a fellow United Methodist," shouted the Rev. Will Green after reciting Matthew 25, "I call upon you to repent, to care for those in need, to remember that when you do not care for others, you are wounding the body of Christ."

Even evangelical leaders who support and advise Trump often spoke critically of Sessions during his final year.

In April, Liberty University President Jerry Falwell Jr. derided Sessions on Twitter, describing him as a "phony" who is only pretending to support the president.

Johnnie Moore — a former Falwell lieutenant who in the past has operated as de facto spokesman for evangelical leaders who advise Trump — openly criticized Sessions attempt to defend family separation, telling the Washington Post, "While Sessions may take the Bible seriously, in this situation he has demonstrated he is no theologian."