

## Governing Authorities

A Sermon by Rev. Cal Chinn  
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### Romans 13:1-7

*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. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. 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 to them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.*

There are times when a text screams for attention. And with everything that is happening today—last Tuesday's primary elections, everything in the news from the Royal Wedding in London to the off again and on again talks with North Korea to the G-7 meeting in Canada—Karl Barth's quote which I shared with you a couple of Sundays ago rings loudly in our ears: *"The proper way to read and study the scriptures is to have the Bible in one hand and the Daily Newspaper in the other."* And I don't need to remind you that the controversy over politics in the pulpit is a deep concern not only for this congregation, but also for congregations across the country. In all my years of pastoral ministry, controversy does not go away on its own; you have to address it, and hopefully address it in ways that encourage dialogue and healthy conversation.

It was a luxury to be able to sit back and enjoy being a spectator to the electrifying and unexpected moment when the African American bishop—Michael Bruce Curry—spoke to British aristocrats and members of the royal family in the cadence of the black American church. What was striking was not just his message, of love and inclusion; or his tone which was soaring and magisterial; or his obvious delight in the matter at hand. It was the sheer fact of his prominence in a Royal wedding that also featured a fair number of ecclesiastical heavyweights, including the Archbishop of Canterbury. Quoting Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Bishop Curry preached: *"We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love; and when we do that we will make of this old world, a new world."* I can imagine how upsetting it was to some members of the Royal Family as well as to factions of British society by what Bishop Curry did in the pulpit.

Furthermore, I have found over my years of ministry that controversies come to you, whether you want to deal with them or not. This is God's doing; after all, **"He's got the whole world in His hands."** Redemption and transformation of our personal lives, the life of congregations, and the world we live in must travel through the difficult road of reading the scriptures with the Bible in one hand and the Daily Newspaper in the other. This

morning's text from Romans challenges us regardless of where we stand on the political spectrum. And more than that, it challenges congregations that insist on keeping politics out of the pulpit.

I. Over the years, I have struggled with this text from Romans—***“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities...you also must pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants...pay to all what is due them...”*** I have fought the text with a lot of “yes, buts” and “what ifs”. *What if* the German Evangelical Church had stood up against Hitler? Would the Holocaust have been limited if not prevented? *What if* Civil Disobedience had not taken place in the 60’s? Would we have elected an African American President? *What if* no one protested the Vietnam War? *What if* churches and universities and corporations had not divested in South Africa? Would apartheid have been ended? A couple of Tuesday evenings back, I watched a documentary on the “Chinese Exclusion Act.” If churches had stood up at the time, would an entire race of people have been excluded from entering the United States? If churches stood up, could Executive Order 9066, the internment of Japanese American citizens during WWII, have been prevented?

It is time to give Paul, the author of these words, the benefit of the doubt, to see where he may be coming from. For starters, Paul is not telling us anything that is new, much less extreme. If anything, Paul is simply citing what any traditional Jew would say about government, that governing authorities are divinely appointed; that is, government is from God. If God is the creator and ruler of all, governments then rule by the pleasure of God. In Paul’s context, the Roman Empire ruled by the pleasure of God. So anyone who rejects the rule of government, be it the Roman Empire or the Trump administration, rejects God’s rule. In the Old Testament, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, is referred to as God’s servant. Cyrus, the great Persian king, is addressed as God’s anointed, the Messiah. So, Paul is simply re-stating the accepted view of scripture that kings, queens, emperors, rulers, presidents, empires, nations, states are appointed by God. So, Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Kim Jung-un, Benjamin Netanyahu...all are appointed by God.

II. This text turned out to be a critical text for the late Elder Lee from the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown when he returned to China in the late 1990’s for a visit to his home village and to share the gospel. Elder Lee chose to preach on this very text from Romans to an audience that included members of the Communist Party. Because of Paul’s affirmation of governing authorities, the Communist Party members were satisfied that Christianity was not opposed to their government. Preaching on this text enabled Elder Lee to be welcomed and received and he was able to continue his preaching and witness in China. So, in certain contexts, something good and favorable can be said for this text.

In today’s context, with rampant racial tensions and gun violence, some sort of government intervention is needed. The fact that three out of four toxic waste dumps that fail to comply with Environmental Protection Agency regulations are found in Black or Latino communities; that two million tons of radioactive uranium has been dumped by the government and corporations on Native American lands, in the absence of governance, of governing authorities, private interests are getting away with profit-making at the expense of human well-being. If dangerous levels of toxic contamination was discovered in the water source in a predominantly white community in Michigan, instead of Flint, where the population is predominantly African American, all of us would demand a lot more from governing authorities. I know that the current issue of Black Lives Matter has torn this congregation apart. But what if the police were called on you while you were charcoal grilling in Golden Gate Park? Or were swarmed by several police cars as you were checking out of your Airbnb rental because a neighbor who saw you carrying luggage out of the house thought you were burglars? And what if you were arrested for trespassing at Peet’s coffee shop on the corner of Fillmore and Sacramento after a barista called police to say that you refused to leave even though you were just waiting for a colleague?

III. Governing authorities are at once needed **and** not to be obeyed blindly. Paul has more to say. The real interest and concern of Paul, I believe, is not governing authorities, but the ***authority of God***. For Paul writes: ***“There is NO authority except from God.”*** For anyone to claim any kind of authority without acknowledging God as the source of authority is dangerous. There is no question that power and authority, even when achieved democratically, still falls short of the authority of God. Our best intentions and strategies are at best limited. Every person who holds positions of power and authority to govern must submit to a higher authority. For Christians, it is the Lordship of Jesus. And that is best captured in Colossians: ***“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and***

**for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the Head of the Body, the Church.” (1:15-18)** The point of Colossians is to challenge us to recognize that in the midst of competing claims—by candidates, by parties, by movements, by causes, by platforms, by issues—our voice and vote matters. Our vote matters not for the candidates running for office; our vote matters for ourselves because our vote is a choice of who and what will govern and regulate our lives. And if Jesus is not the organizing principle of your life, who and what is? I invite and challenge you to choose Jesus.

Jesus does not promise to lower taxes and to create more jobs, but Jesus does call us to feed the hungry and to quench the thirst of those who hunger and thirst. Jesus does not promise to tax the rich and to protect Social Security; but Jesus does call us to clothe the naked. Jesus does not promise to make America great again and to be tough on immigration; but Jesus does call us to welcome the stranger and the little children. Jesus does not promise health care reforms; but Jesus does call us to visit the sick. Jesus does not promise less government and fewer regulations; Jesus smashes rules and regulations that prevent him from healing the sick and reaching out to the homeless and outcast. Jesus does not ask God to bless America, or any nation for that matter; Jesus says, ***The first will be last and the last will be first.***

A couple of weeks ago, a man scaled four stories to rescue a child dangling from a Paris balcony. They’re calling him Spider-Man. Mamoudou Gassama, a 22-year-old migrant from Mali, arrived in France in September without documentation. When he saw a 4-year old boy clinging to the edge of a balcony, he didn’t hesitate to act. He said, *“I saw all these people shouting, and cars sounding their horns, so I crossed the road to go save him.”* Mr. Gassama climbed the building in a remarkable display of speed, athleticism and courage, and he pulled the child to safety. His good deed did not go unrewarded. Mr. Gassama met with the French president Emmanuel Macron, who granted him the opportunity to live legally in France. Mr. Macron said in a statement that Paris firefighters were “eager to welcome” Mr. Gassama into their ranks. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, *“The time is always right to do what is right.”* My father voted for Barry Goldwater; so when I asked my father for his blessing on my decision to participate in the Selma March, he refused. I went anyway. Martin Luther King, Jr. also had this to say, and I paraphrase him: *“The ultimate measure of a congregation is not where she stands in moments of comfort and convenience; but where she stands at times of challenge and controversy.”* Calvary Church, we are family! Better yet, we are the Body of Christ; and as the Body of Christ, ***JESUS IS LORD!***

