

# Has God Given President Trump the Authority to “Take Out” Kim Jong Un?

## A Conversation with Paul and Jesus

Romans 13:1-7

Luke 9:51-56

Rev. Robert Jeffress the pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas Texas, said recently:

When it comes to how we should deal with evil doers, the Bible, in the book of Romans is very clear: God has endowed rulers full power to use whatever means necessary- including war- to stop evil. In the case of North Korea, God has given Trump authority to take out Kim Jong Un.

I'd like to open up a conversation with Jesus and Paul about Jeffress' pronouncement. The context is President Trump's statement that if Kim Jong Un continues to take aggressive actions, North Korea “will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen.” The statement, conjuring up the specter of nuclear war, has set nerves on edge around the world. Then came Jeffress' comments. They garnered special attention because he is on President Trump's council of evangelical advisors and was chosen by Trump to preach the sermon at his inauguration day worship service.

Well what does *Romans* 13 actually say and mean? And what would Jesus add to the conversation?

### I

In Romans 13:1-7 Paul is writing to the Christians in Rome about how to live within the Roman system of civil law. “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, Paul says, “for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been

instituted by God.” Rulers, he says, “are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad...then do what is good.”

Paul was preaching good citizenship and warning against rebellion. At that time, in Paul’s estimate, Rome’s laws and order were a force for good, for maintaining civic order, so *obey the governing authorities*.

Do we hear in these words a warrant for the waging of war, conventional or nuclear? It is good advice about daily conduct within a system of laws. It is not a blank check given to rulers to wage war against so-called evil doers.

It is more than interesting that the verse before Romans 13:1-7 is “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Rom. 12:21) and the verse after is “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” (Rom. 13:8)

Romans 13:1-7 has had a checkered past. It has been used to defend the divine right of kings, to prop up unjust regimes and to keep slaves in their place. During Nazi Germany it was used to reinforce obedience to Hitler’s rule.

Martin Luther had taught Germans a “two kingdoms” theology. You obeyed God in the spiritual realm by being good Christians and obeyed God in the civic realm by being good citizens. The two kingdoms operated by different rules. The realms did not overlap. Into the gaps in this theology the Nazis came to power.

## II

The question comes then, “What about when a government becomes a threat to *good* conduct and is itself engaging in evil conduct?” Are we mandated to obey? Is there ever a Christian duty to resist evil and unjust laws, to practice civil disobedience? Are there

moments when we must say with Peter and the apostles, “We must obey God rather than human authorities” (Acts 5:29)?

The larger Biblical witness exhibits many times when people of God stand up against evil and corrupt authorities. Take Moses and Daniel for example. *Revelation* 13 identifies the Roman government as the demonic Beast during a terrible time of persecution. Seven verses from Romans should not be taken as timeless truth about government as the hand of God.

### III

Following the teaching of Jesus, Christians were largely pacifists during the first 300 years. When Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity and Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, Christian moral theologians joined with other moral philosophers to develop a theory of “just war,” or, better put, “justified war.”

For a war to be just it must meet these major criteria. One, there must be “just cause” (*jus ad bellum*), and two, there must be “just conduct” in war (*jus in bello*).

*Just cause* for war has generally meant:

- 1) It must be a war of self-defense, i.e., to defend against attack, or immediate threat of attack.
- 2) It must have “competent authority,” that is, be legally constituted by a nation and/or league of nations.
- 3) It must be a “last resort”, after all other measures have been exhausted.

*Just conduct* in war has included two criteria:

- 1) The law of proportionality: The means of destruction must be proportional to the ends being sought. We must not become as evil as the evil we fight.
- 2) Protection against civilian and non-combatant deaths.

Just war theory is an attempt to restrain the evil of war. The Geneva Conventions seek to regulate what is permissible and non-permissible in the conduct of war.

Many believe, as do I, that two kinds of war are not allowable under “just war” theory: Nuclear war and what is called “preventative war, or preemptive war”.

#### IV

But to this point in the sermon we’ve not listened to Jesus about war and violence, and he is the clearest manifestation of who God is and what God wants.

His teachings are clear: “Love you enemies” he said, without a list of qualifications. He was a pacifist, as are many of his followers. He did not join the Zealots who in the name of God sought to overthrow the Roman oppression. Jesus chose to die as a victim of violence rather than be a perpetrator of violence no matter how just the cause.

He refused the path of what one has called “sacred violence,” the use of violence in the name of God. “Sacred violence” is always near the human heart and the heart of religion. We must not fall into its seductive snare. Sacred violence scapegoats a person or a group of people and believes their elimination is our salvation, such as the Nazi plan to eliminate all the Jews in Europe.

Let me offer one more glimpse of the mind and heart of Jesus, from Luke 9:51-56.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, and he sent his disciples to secure lodging for the night in a Samaritan village. The village refused them hospitality. James and John, two of his disciples, aptly nicknamed “sons of thunder”, returned to Jesus and said,

“Lord, do you want us to bid fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”

Some ancient manuscripts add “as Elijah did,” harking back to the time when God sent fire from heaven to consume Elijah’s sacrifice and Elijah slew the 450 prophets of Baal.

The text records Jesus’ response: “But he turned and rebuked them.” You might say, he refused the nuclear option.

Jesus was offering a new way beyond the sacred violence found in society and religion. Jesus is, as one has quipped, the answer to God’s bad reputation.

We read the Bible through the lens of Jesus. You can read the Bible trying to see how many people you can include or how many you can exclude. If you read it through the spirit of Jesus, you read it trying to see how many you can include. Walter Brueggemann says there is a “war tradition” in the Bible and a “peace tradition”. The question is: which is the main text and which is the sub-text? If you read the Bible through the spirit of Jesus the main text is the peace tradition.

“Jesus, can we call down fire from heaven and wipe them out?!”

And Jesus rebuked them, as he rebukes his followers today who are all too ready to rain down fire and fury upon the enemies of the United States.