

## **“REFLECTIONS ON GOVERNMENT AUTHORITY, II.”**

**Rev. Robert T. Woodyard**

**First Christian Reformed Church**

**May 24, 2020, 10:30 AM**

### **Scripture Texts: Romans 13:1-7**

**Prayer:** Holy Father, like streams of water direct all our hearts and minds to the truth of your Word and its application to our lives. Cause seed sown in weakness to grow by your power. Come, Holy Spirit, hear and help, for the sake of Jesus, in whose name we are bold to make all our requests. Amen.

### **Introduction.**

Last week I mentioned there are two key texts in the NT that teach us how to relate to those in authority over us, I Peter 2:11-17 and Romans 13:1-7. Last week I read I Peter 2, this week I read Romans 13 so you have in mind the context for my reflections.

I am not naïve. I know preaching these texts especially in times like these can flush more birds than can be shot in one or two sermons. I know that some of you are saying, “But what about ....?” And “Yeah, but what about this or that?”

I also understand that our context is very different. This is not first century Roman empire but twentieth century America. We are still living in a constitutional republic.

And now add to all this, on Friday President Trump whacked the beehive by declaring all houses of worship open. Can he do that? Does his authority override governors? Does his authority override the elders of churches? Or parents in the home?

Let’s begin with just a quick summary of three points I made last week.

### **Where does authority come from?**

Because God is the God of all authority and we are made in the image of God, all earthly authority is a derived authority, the source of it is God. God has ordained all human, earthly authority. God is sovereign over all authority from the best to the worst. They are all His servants, His ministers to do His will. God’s authority is ultimate and absolute. All earthly authority is limited, bounded, under God’s authority.

### **What are the authorities?**

From Scripture we learn there are three spheres of authority, three spheres of sovereignty, the home under a husband and parents, the church under elders and pastors, and the state under rulers or civil magistrates.

Sometimes these spheres overlap and sometimes they conflict, sometimes one sphere usurps authority from another sphere, and sometimes one sphere abdicates its authority to another sphere.

### **Why do we submit to authorities?**

**Romans 13:2, 5** Whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ... 5 Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.

We submit because all authority is from God; whether elected or not, they have a claim on our submission. We are called to submit to authority, even when that authority is unbelieving and pagan, even when we think they are wrong.

God gives authority for the common good, to reward good and punish evil and for our good. The commandment that covers this aspect of life is the fifth commandment, honor your father and mother that it might go well with you in life.

What happens when children rebel against their parents? Chaos ensues and it doesn't go very well for everyone. What happens when church members rebel against the authority of the elders? Chaos ensues and you get church divisions and splits. What happens when citizens rebel against authority? You get chaos, coups, a divided country.

Our basic demeanor, our default setting toward those in authority should be submission and honor. This is where we start and what we do until there are Biblical reasons for disobedience

### ***Why did we close our worship services in submission to the governors ban on all gatherings?***

Now let me get to the practical application of this for us as a church in this Covid crisis. Why did our council close our worship services?

Did we close the doors because we are non-essential? Let me assure you that was not the reason. Neither President Trump nor Governor Inslee have the power or authority to say we are essential or non-essential. The civil sphere has no authority to make that judgment and just because they said or implied that doesn't mean it's true and we don't have to accept it.

God is God and He ordained His church and He created us to worship Him. Worship is the most essential thing we do. So why did we close?

Does the federal or state government have the right to tell churches not to gather for worship? Is this a violation of our first amendment rights of freedom of worship and freedom to assemble? Is this religious persecution? Should churches defy the governor's order?

The first thing we as a council had to discern was whether we were in a Romans 13:1-7/I Peter 2:13-17 situation where we should submit to those in authority over us? Or were we in an Acts 4:18-19/Acts 5:27-30 situation where we should say with Peter and the apostles, "We must obey God rather than men"?

The short answer is we judged this to be a Romans 13/I Peter 2 situation. The council determine taking such a serious step as closing our worship services was the right response for *four reasons*.

**First, to show respect for our God-given government (Romans 13).**

This is an instance of a national emergency and the state had a compelling interest to take necessary steps to limit the spread of this deadly disease. It is not only the right of the state, but the duty/responsibility of the state to protect all its citizens, by issuing a quarantine order in the face of a contagious social disease and restricting large gatherings.

What the government did was not necessarily a violation of the constitution, or at least not yet. The civil authority has the right to exercise the power of the sword, to protect life through quarantine. But there are some principles they must follow if they are going to interfere with our right to worship God.

The government must show a compelling interest in limiting our freedoms, in this case public safety and physical harm. It must be temporary. It must be neutrally and broadly applied to all spheres of life. They cannot single out only religious activities. It must be narrowly focused on the stated goal of slowing the spread of the virus.

If the government's interference becomes unnecessarily burdensome, or religiously motivated then that is another matter. Like many of you I happen to have personal views that differ considerably with what our president and our governor have done.

But this was not an attack on Christianity, nor on our faith, nor on Jesus. If our civil magistrates had closed our worship assemblies because we were preaching on the

wickedness of abortion or sexual perversion, or proclaiming Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation, then of course we would defy their orders and continue to meet and worship and preach these truths. Or if they had just closed churches but not other gathering places we would have good reason to object, and we would still be meeting for worship.

If this were to become the on-going state of affairs, where there is no plan to ever allow churches to meet again, this would be a cause to defy the state and meet together.

There are plenty of other areas where we might take issue with our government, but this is not one of them. They are within their rights and responsibility to do what they did, and so we should submit without complaining.

This kind of quarantine is also not unprecedented in Scripture. When God gave His Law for the nation of Israel to Moses it included extensive teaching for what to do in cases of infectious and contagious diseases (see Leviticus 13-14). There were laws about washing and cleaning. Individuals who were infected were to be quarantined by putting them outside the camp (social distancing). In the case of an infectious disease contaminating a building, the authorities had the right and responsibility to quarantine the building, and if necessary even to destroy the building completely. This was not a violation of anyone's rights nor an abuse of governmental authority.

There is another reason for the shepherds of the flock of God to submit to the civil authorities. It is part of good leadership. You can't be a good leader if you can't also be a good follower. Leaders who can't submit often become tyrants and then their leadership becomes toxic, lording it over others.

By submitting, our leaders modeled for all of us how we should exercise a spirit and demeanor of submission, without grumbling or complaining.

Parents play a crucial role in this business of submitting to those in authority. It starts at home, they set the tone, they build the foundation of respect and honor and obedience, by our words and example and discipline.

We Americans don't submit to any authority very well. God has exposed many of our rebellious hearts. This needs to be a matter of personal reflection and repentance.

**Second, to show love for our neighbor (Mark 12:33).**

A significant number of our congregation is over the age of 60, and we also have people with compromised health, making them more vulnerable. We do not want them, or their loved ones to get sick. Because Covid-19 is easily transmitted, not putting large groups

of people together (such as a worship service) is an appropriate way to show love to our congregation, and set an example to others on how to love our neighbors. It is our spiritual responsibility to do what is best for our church family.

Historically, this type of quarantine is not unprecedented. Churches were closed during the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918. Churches gladly cooperated and submitted for the sake of protecting life and for the sake of loving their neighbor. This is a form of keeping the sixth commandment, “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13). We must act in a way that preserves and protects life.

**Third, to show God transcends denominations and we can work with brothers and sisters in Christ around the city and country**, both within our denomination and outside of it, in loving our community. While cancelling worship is an extremely unusual act of love, and not to be undertaken lightly, we joined with brothers and sisters in Lynden and around the state in this effort to stem the spread of this virus.

**Finally, this quarantine will give us a new appreciation for Psalm 122:1.**

*I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord!”*

God has exposed our hearts on this matter as well. Have we not grown complacent and casual in our attitude about worship? How many of us have treated it as just another thing to do, or even something we do if we don’t have something better? How many of us by our attitudes or actions have actually treated worship as non-essential? Has God closed His church to open our hearts?

It is our hope and prayer that when we are finally able to join together in worship we will all have a deeper appreciation of the gift of corporate worship!

That day may be coming sooner than many of us thought. In light of President Trump’s statement, the elders are having a special meeting this Tuesday night to discuss how and when we will open for worship. It is not an easy or simple conversation or decision. There are lots of variables. Can we do it in a reasonably safe manner? What precautions will we take? How many can be in the sanctuary? Will we block pews, not take the offering, not have a nursery, will we sing, will we have communion and if so how? What will Governor Inslee say on Tuesday? Will we be able to comply with the CDC guidelines for opening?

We have members ready to go full steam ahead and we have members who have concerns. What will love for each other look like? What if the elders come up with guidelines some of us don’t like? Will we be able to submit our of love and honor?

One other key part of this decision is what will be the best witness to our unbelieving neighbor? Will our meeting together be viewed as irresponsible, reckless, a lack of love for our community? Will we be viewed as selfish? If we meet together is there a way of doing it that mitigates that kind of criticism?

Pray for the elders!

### **Implications and application.**

This is not Nero's Rome. We do have freedoms, we are not yet oppressed. In a free country with our participatory government and laws there are several things we can do and should do.

We can write our representatives, we can call our congressmen, we can sign petitions. I have written a letter to Governor Inslee, signed by a number of pastors in our community.

We can participate in lawful, peaceful protests. Sounds like an oxymoron doesn't it. We can protest in the ways that are permitted in our country. Peacefully, non-violently, respectfully. Not by destroying private property or pushing over police cars or killing people.

We protest at abortion clinics, we have our rallies and parades. There are authority-honoring and Christ-honoring ways to stand up against injustice and plea for justice and fairness.

We can initiate lawsuits through our legal system. We have incredible freedoms and we are still free to exercise them. Our system of government does not call us to be passive, but actively engaged.

I want to return to something I said earlier. What if the government's interference becomes unnecessarily burdensome, or religiously motivated? There is a ditch on both sides of this path toward honoring the emperor and submitting to authority.

We are generally good, law abiding citizens. But it is possible to be so to a fault, to turn submission into a weakness. Governments are human and sinful. Our government is slowly becoming increasingly godless, more intrusive, more controlling. They have already demonstrated they don't know the essential value of worship, they don't hold our values dear. And as it gets worse they will start to punish good behavior and reward bad behavior.

What has happened these past three month has exposed the dark side of our government and what they are capable of, pushing the edges of constitutionality. The time will come when we must stand and resist and suffer the consequences.

We have members of our church whose parents and grandparents resisted the wicked and oppressive authority of Nazi Germany. Holland had a great resistance movement and protected many Jews.

But that courageous spirit in the face of evil can be quickly lost. Today Holland has cast off its godly heritage and has betrayed God in its total embrace of abortion and euthanasia.

As we continue on a path of comfort and ease and affluence, wanting just to go along to get along, we must guard against becoming soft and losing the will to stand and resist what is godless and unholy.

The day is coming when we will have to say no to those who are in authority over us, whether it is our government or to our denomination. Will we be wise, able to discern when we have moved from a Romans 13 situation to an Acts 4/5 situation? Will we be courageous in the face of consequences and suffering? May we be found faithful to the end, having fought the good fight and run the race with perseverance.

Yes, may we honor the emperor, but most of all and most importantly of all, may we fear God and honor Him and His Word.

**Prayer:** Holy Father, Heavenly Master, King of the universe, by the eternal counsel of your wisdom and will you have given to the sons of men, power to rule over all things on earth. We pray for them, asking you to grant to them health, strength, wisdom and a fear of the Lord, that they may administer the government you have given them without offense to you. Direct them to rule according to that which is good and well-pleasing in your sight, punishing what is wicked and contrary to your will. May they administer justice, promote peace, do what is best for our nation, and gain favor with their people and you. Only you have the power to do these things, and more besides, as we ask in the name of the king of kings and Lord of lords, enthroned in majesty at your right hand in glory, even Jesus Christ the great High Priest and guardian of our souls, Amen. (inspired by St. Clement of Rome).