



Text: Romans 13:1-7<sup>1</sup>

Series: Right Living – The Letter to the Romans

Title: Part 21 – Pray or Not Pray, What Should Rick Warren Do?

Date: January 11, 2009

Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

On Tuesday, January 20, 2009, Barack Obama will be sworn in as the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States of America. Since 1937, prayer has been a part of the inauguration ceremony, usually with an invocation at the beginning and a benediction at the close, but sometimes with a prayer during the ceremony. Contrary what might be a popular belief, Billy Graham has not prayed at all of the inaugurations! But he has been a frequent participant, more frequent, in fact than any other single person. He prayed for Richard Nixon in 1969, for George H Bush in 1989 and for Bill Clinton in 1997. Franklin Graham continued the family tradition when he prayed for George W Bush in 2001. In 2005, Billy did pray for George W but it was during a post-inauguration prayer service held in the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. Over the years Billy Graham has participated in a number of pre- and post-inauguration prayer services for various presidents: in 1965 for Lyndon Johnson, in 1973 for Richard Nixon, in 1981 and 1985 for Ronald Reagan. What you and I might not quickly notice, being somewhat unfamiliar with American politics, is that Billy prayed for both Democrats and Republicans.

President-elect Obama created a quite a stir a few weeks ago when he announced his decision to ask Pastor Rick Warren, the author of *The Purpose Driven Life* and pastor of Saddleback Church in California to give the invocation prayer at his inauguration. Why the stir, you might ask?

During the recent presidential election another vote was being held in the state of California. It was a vote on what was called “Proposition 8.” The essence of “Proposition 8” was to limit marriage in California to a union between a man and a woman, thus eliminating same-sex marriages. Rick Warren was one of the major voices supporting Proposition 8 which was successful and was accepted by the majority of the people of California. Barack Obama has portrayed himself as a friend of Gay and Lesbian rights and so when he invited Rick Warren to pray at his inauguration, Gay and Lesbian advocates were shocked and outraged at his decision, calling it among other things, “abominable,” “despicable,” “a genuine blow” to their campaign and a “big slap in the face.” Even though he acknowledges that he and Warren do not agree on issues like abortion or gay rights, Obama defended his choice of Warren as an example of his desire to demonstrate to the American people of how it is possible to “disagree without

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission, All rights reserved.



being disagreeable.” Back in August, Warren invited Obama and John McCain, the Republican candidate for the presidency, to Saddleback Church for a public forum on a variety of issues related to faith and the public interest. Obama and Warren talked about many things and publicly disagreed on the issues of abortion and homosexual marriage.

Not only has Obama’s choice of Warren drawn fire from gays and lesbians, but evangelicals have also called into question the wisdom of accepting Obama’s invitation to pray at the inauguration. Albert Mohler, the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, said that if he were asked to pray at Obama’s inauguration he would decline the offer. The Bible clearly calls us to pray for our leaders. Paul wrote...

**“I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior” 1 Timothy 2:1-3**

Although Mohler promises to pray for the president, he cites Obama’s promise to sign pro-abortion legislation within hours of his inauguration as the reason he “could not in good conscience offer a formal prayer at his inauguration.”<sup>2</sup>

Should Rick Warren pray at the inauguration of Barack Obama? If you were in his situation, what would you do?

Does the Bible give us any guidance in dealing with this question? I believe it does and while there are many passages that bear on this question, one of the most important passages we need to examine is found in Paul’s Letter to the Romans. In chapter 13 we read this...

**<sup>1</sup> Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. <sup>2</sup> Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. <sup>3</sup> For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, <sup>4</sup> for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup> Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. <sup>6</sup> For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. <sup>7</sup> Pay to all what is owed to**

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted in R. Albert Mohler Jr., “The High Cost of Being (And Staying) Cool – Rick Warren in a Whirlwind,” Friday, December 19, 2008 @ [www.albertmohler.com/blog\\_print.php?id=3023](http://www.albertmohler.com/blog_print.php?id=3023)



**them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.**

Our answer to the question about whether or not Christians should pray for political leaders, regardless of their political stripe or agenda, must be rooted in this Word from God to us. And it is a strong word. As one Bible scholar put it, the most frequent question that comes to mind when we read what Paul wrote here is not “what does it mean?” but rather, “what is the exception?” Paul clearly calls us to a submission to civil authority that is radically demanding and our first impulse is often to find the loopholes and escape clauses. But before we wander off to think about what Paul leaves unsaid, let’s immerse ourselves in what he clearly *does* say.

**First** of all, there is no question in Paul’s mind that...

### **God calls governments into existence**

**“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” Romans 13:1**

Paul tells us that civil government is “from God” (v.1), “instituted by God” (v.1) and “appointed” by God (v.2). Government is not our idea – it’s God’s idea. God has created “governing authorities” for the purpose of bringing order into the chaotic relationships of sinful humanity.

In the American political tradition a phrase spoken by Abraham Lincoln is often quoted to define the essence of good government. In his Gettysburg Address, Lincoln said that the horrible carnage of the Civil War was part of the greater struggle to ensure that “government of the people, and by the people and for the people might not perish from the earth.”

Although we are not part of the American political experience, our popular understanding of the essence of democratic government is essentially the same. We believe that government is a “people” thing. We believe that governments draw their legitimacy from popular support measured by regularly called elections. I’m grateful, though, that the preamble to our Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms points us to a foundation for our government that is higher than mere popular will. It states...

**“Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law....”**

Nebuchadnezzar was an ancient king who needed to learn the lesson that God is supreme over all government. He was the sole ruler over the Empire of Babylon, one of the greatest empires the world has ever seen. Babylon has almost



become a mythic idea within Western culture, almost like Atlantis. But unlike Atlantis, the myth of Babylon is founded upon historic reality and Nebuchanezzar was at the centre of the story.

Nebuchanezzar reigned during the time that Israel was in exile and the prophet Daniel was a member of the king's group of wisemen. The king had a dream one night that deeply disturbed him and he invited the wisemen to interpret it for him. In the dream, the king saw a great tree whose branches spanned the globe. A heavenly being came and ordered that the tree be cut down, leaving only a stump. This heavenly being said of the tree that was cut down...

**“Let him be wet with the dew of heaven. Let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth. Let his mind be changed from a man’s, and let a beast’s mind be given to him; and let seven periods of time pass over him. The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.” Daniel 4:16-17**

Daniel understood exactly what the dream meant. Nebuchadnezzar was the great tree. He would lose his kingdom, lose his mind and live like an animal in the fields for seven years...

**“till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.” Daniel 4:25**

Everything happened exactly as Daniel prophesied it would. Nebuchadnezzar went mad, lived like an animal and after seven years was restored to his throne at which time he recorded this tribute to the King of kings...

**“At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation....” Daniel 4:34**

I love the fact that the coronation ritual of our queens and kings includes a quotation from Ezekiel that reminds our monarchs that the crown they wear is theirs only...

**“until he comes, the one to whom judgment belongs, and I will give it to him.” Ezekiel 21:27**

I believe that heaven will reveal that empires have risen and kingdoms have fallen in proportion to the way they have understood and lived the truth that “the Most High rules the kingdoms of men and gives it to whom he wills.”



**Secondly**, Paul tells us that...

### **Governing authorities are God's "civil servants"**

I grew up in Ottawa in the era when the civil service was the major employer in the city. This was long before the high tech industry turned Ottawa into "Silicone Valley North." Just down the street from where I lived there was a grocery store reserved for federal civil servants. You had to be a government employee to shop there. It should come as no surprise that there was a kind of quiet undercurrent of resentment among us "townies" about the civil service. We used to tell jokes that began "how many civil servants does it take to change a light bulb, etc..." or included punch lines like "you can always tell a civil servant but you can't tell him much." The church in which I grew up had a number of prominent government employees in its leadership and membership and I eventually grew to respect their competence and their dedication to their jobs. From what I saw in my years in Ottawa, I have to say that our country has some very dedicated and gifted men and women working for our national interest.

Twice Paul refers to the governing authorities as "servants" of God. The purpose of a "servant" is fulfilling the will of his or her master. He also calls them "ministers of God" (v.6). Paul used a word he later used to describe his own priestly ministry of preaching the Gospel. Have you ever thought of our MP or MLA as a "minister of God"? Paul tells us that we must! They are servants of God whom God has placed into authority in our society to serve His purposes in this world.

God's will for government, **first** of all, is that they are to be...

### **His "civil servants" to encourage the good**

**"Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good." Romans 13:3-4**

When we think of the Roman Empire under which Paul lived we often think of its evil and its excesses. Not long after Paul wrote this Letter to the Romans the emperor Nero engaged in a vicious persecution of Christians as a way to cover up his burning of large sections of the city of Rome. In Acts 18, verse 2, we're told that the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome, those who believed in Jesus as well as those who didn't, probably because of riots that had been instigated by Jews opposed to the preaching of Christ. Paul wasn't naïve about the "essential goodness" of the Roman Empire. He knew full well its potential for sin and evil.

But the Roman Empire had also assisted him in the preaching of the Gospel. In the Book of Acts, there are several occasions recorded where the Roman



officials put down riots instigated by those opposed to the preaching of the Gospel and protected Paul from the rage of the mobs: in Philippi (Acts 16), in Corinth (Acts 18), in Ephesus (Acts 19) and in Jerusalem (Acts 22). At times, Paul took protection from persecution by appealing to his Roman citizenship and in the process of being heard and tried at several judicial levels he had the opportunity to share the Gospel, even leading some of the Emperor's personal body guard, the Praetorians, to faith in Christ (Acts 25-28). Rome's record of "good" wasn't perfect – no government's record is perfect. But the order that Roman authorities imposed helped to further the cause of the preaching of the Gospel.

Our government's record of "good" isn't perfect, either, but there is much that government does to promote the "good." Government enhances our life through educational and health care system. It promotes "peace and order" through the provision of a code of law, the protection of police forces and the justice of our courts. **Think about this simple fact with me:** when you step outside this church, and place your foot on the asphalt, you don't need to leave a paved surface whether you choose to travel to the Pacific Ocean, to the Atlantic ocean or to the Gulf of Mexico. That freedom to travel is courtesy of government.

And of course, we have the freedom to speak the Gospel of Christ. No, it's not a perfect situation. I grew up in a church where one of our men had been in jail in the 1950s for preaching the Gospel on the streets of small towns in northern Quebec. The Supreme Court, however, upheld his freedom and the freedom of others to preach the Gospel. Yes, there are some restrictions on the way we communicate the message about Jesus, but there is nothing that effectively stops us from getting the message about Jesus to everyone in this land.

**Second**, God's will for government is that they are to be...

### **His "civil servants" to punish the wrong**

Paul wrote...

**"But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer." Romans 13:4**

I've been a volunteer at Bowden Institution for a number of years. I'm glad we have men and women dedicated to the punishment of wrongdoing. I'm glad we have lawmakers, police officers, lawyers & judges, prison guards, parole officers and social workers – I'm glad we have a system of justice that deals with "the wrongdoer." I can't imagine what life would be like without it! Some years ago I spoke with a man who told me that, in his opinion, crime and evil were just figments of our imagination. They were just ideas. I told him that I had a great idea. I said there were some guys at Bowden Institution to whom I would like to



introduce him. Maybe he could have them move in with him and see how long his philosophy could stand up in the light of day. Some of those men have committed acts of real evil and I'm glad we have a state that had the power and authority to forcibly arrest them and continues to have the necessary tools to hold them in confinement.

We live in a world in which sin has damaged our ability to relate to other human beings. Without a civil authority with "teeth," life would become hellish and vicious. Paul calls the civil authority "an avenger" who executes the wrath of God against wrongdoing. In chapter 12, verse 19 believers were told...

**"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" Romans 12:19**

What Paul is saying is that civil authority acts on God's behalf to bring justice to those who have been wronged. As individuals we do not have the authority to avenge ourselves or use "the sword" but the state, acting as God's servant, has His authority to use force to bring about justice. People differ on their understanding of the significance of "the sword" that has been given to the state but my understanding is simple and literal – the state, acting as God's servant, has the authority to use lethal force in dealing with wrongdoing, whether as police officers in the process of arresting criminals, or as the justice system in the assigning of appropriate punishment for capital crime or as the military in the securing of our national security in the face of foreign threats. I've very glad that there are Christians who have been called of God to serve in our police, in our prisons, in our courts and in our military. They have a tough challenge because sin is a tough opponent. They need our prayer and our support.

**How are we to relate to God's "civil servants"?**

**First**, of Paul tells us that...

**We are to submit to God's "civil servants"**

**"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." Romans 13:1**

To be "subject" means to recognize the legitimacy of the authority of the civil government as instituted by God for the encouragement of good and the punishment of evil. We are to cooperate with their God-given role in the world and not "resist" them (v.2). Remember, they are ministers of God.

This is where we really start looking for loopholes! And for your relief I offer this insight: **to be "subject" is not necessarily to "obey."** In the vast majority of instances in our society our subjection to the authority of God-instituted government will mean compliance with what we are asked to do, even if we disagree with it. We will pay our taxes, even if we think they are too high or



question the government's accountability for the use of our money. We will wear our seatbelts, even if we want to experience the freedom of flying through our windshields! We will honour the speed limit, even though we just bought this really fast car and the road is clear in front of us! We will vote in elections, even if our party of choice will not form the government. We will become involved in the political process so that our voice can be heard. Today we're asking you to either attend the town meeting regarding the bylaw change requested by the Texas Mickey Bar or phone, fax or email your comments to the town office.

But there are times when we must disobey and still submit. The apostles were told by the religious and civil authorities in Jerusalem that they were not to preach in Jesus' name. But the apostles continued to do so because...

**“We must obey God rather than men.” Acts 5:29**

But the civil authorities still exacted a penalty from the apostles by beating them and repeating their demand that they not speak in Jesus' name. After they were beaten, the Book of Acts tells us that ...

**“they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.” Acts 5:41-42**

Jesus said...

**“render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” Matthew 22:21**

Whenever Caesar asks for something that is God's, the child of God must not deny his primary allegiance to God even if that means punishment from the civil authority. One day, that “civil servant” will stand before God and give an account of why he violated his role as God's “civil servant” but we can never obey a human authority who asks us disobey God.

Take a look at this picture. **[Slide of Tower with arrow slit]**

It's a window, really an arrow slit, in a tower inside the Tower of London. I took this picture a few weeks ago because of what this window represents. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the room behind this window was a prison cell for Sir Thomas More, Henry the 8<sup>th</sup>'s chancellor. More had refused to sign Henry's “Act of Supremacy” which declared that King Henry the VIII was the head of the church in England. More, a Catholic, refused to take the oath to Henry as the head of the church, choosing to retain his belief that the Pope was the head of the church in England. Now I don't agree with More's theology, nor with his history of persecution of



Protestant believers, but I certainly applaud his courage in the face of civil pressure to “render unto Caesar” something he believed belonged to God.

Jesus Christ is the head of the church, not Henry the VIII, nor Elizabeth the II nor the Pope of Rome. When More was executed in 1535 for refusing to recognize Henry as the head of the church, it is said that he asked his executioner to tell Henry that ...

**“I died the king’s good servant, and God’s first.”**

He was subject to the king but obedient to the King of kings.

As Bible scholar F.F. Bruce put it...

**“Christian will voice their “no” to Caesar’s unauthorized demands more effectively if they have shown themselves ready to say “yes” to all his authorized demands.”**

Before we engage in acts of civil disobedience we need to ask ourselves...

- **Does the government’s demand require me to deny Christ?**
- **Does the government’s demand force me to engage in actions that are contrary to the Word of God?**
- **Does the government’s demand forbid me to do something that God requires of me?**

**Second**, Paul tells us that...

**We are to pay taxes to God’s “civil servants”**

**“For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.” Romans 13:6**

And here we really start looking for loopholes! Unfortunately, I have none to offer. Paul’s perspective is that taxes are like tithes, they belong to government because they are “ministers of God.” Taxes enable the government to support all kinds of “good” in our society and they enable the state to protect us from wrongdoers and punish those who do evil. Taxes are given to government but they really belong to God.

Remember Jesus’ teaching that we are to “render to Caesar” what belongs to him? It all began with a question about taxes. Jesus’ opponents were trying to trap him into saying something that was disloyal to the Romans or disloyal to God and so they asked him...



**“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?’ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, ‘Whose likeness and inscription is this?’ They said, ‘Caesar’s.’” Matthew 22:17-21**

So, Jesus said, “Give it back to him. It’s his.”

**Thirdly**, Paul tells us that...

**We are to give honour and respect to God’s “civil servants”**

**“Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.” Romans 13:7**

Blaine Thacker was the MP for Lethbridge from 1979 to 1993. In his last report from Parliament before he retired he wrote some advice to anyone who might be thinking of a career in politics:

*“In summary, may I say that you will find life as a Member of Parliament to be (all at the same time): exciting, satisfying, frustrating, scary and maddeningly slow. It is a life of unremitting criticism because any change is opposed by the beneficiaries of the old system, and the new beneficiaries say that you have not given them enough.”*

There is such an intense mood of cynicism and disrespect about our political leaders and I believe it is our duty to God to do whatever we can to change that. The world around us doesn’t see them for who they really are, but we do. We have been told by God that the men and women who are our political leaders are His servants. Blake Richard, Richard Mars, Judy Dahl, just to name three, are “ministers of God,” appointed by him to accomplish his will.

**So, what should Rick Warren do, pray or not pray?**

This is what Rick Warren had to say...

*“I commend President-elect Obama for his courage to willingly take enormous heat by inviting someone like me, with whom he doesn’t agree on every issue, to offer the Invocation at his historic Inaugural ceremony.*

*Hopefully individuals passionately expressing opinions from the left and the right will recognize that both of us have shown a commitment to model civility in America.*

*The Bible admonishes us to pray for our leaders. I am honored by this opportunity to pray God’s blessing on the office of the President and its current*



*and future inhabitant, asking the Lord to provide wisdom to America's leaders during this critical time in our nation's history.*<sup>3</sup>

On January 20th, I hope God answers Rick Warren's prayer for Barack Obama. I also hope he answers Albert Mohler's prayer and the prayers of all those who pray for President Barack Obama, for Prime Minister Stephen Harper, for President Sarkozy of France, for Prime Minister Brown of Great Britain, for the leaders of Communist China and Russia and Japan "at this critical time in our world's history."

And may God be glorified in the work of His "civil servants."

Prayer for our leaders...

- For our queen and her Governor General
- For the Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his government
- For Premier Ed Stelmach and his government
- For Mayor Judy Dahl and our town council
- For President George W Bush & President-elect Barack Obama
- For our world leaders during this time of world-wide economic crisis

- **Invitation to Prayer Ministry**

- **Final Song:** Jesus, King of the Nations (#801)

- **Benediction**

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.rickwarrennews.com/081218\\_statement.htm](http://www.rickwarrennews.com/081218_statement.htm)