

God and Governments
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North Fork Baptist Church
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I am pleased to announce that the North Fork Baptist Church now has its own web page up and running. Your web address is <http://home.comcast.net/~tmcdebts1/NorthFork.html>. In conversations over the past couple of years with your esteemed pastor and others in the congregation I have suggested that North Fork needs to be on the Internet. The larger community needs to know about the many good things that have happened or are happening here. So I took it upon myself, as a kind of honorary member, to pass along to you the favor one of my students did for me. I was an advisor for Mr. John Urban who was writing his MATS thesis. Upon successfully completing his thesis and graduating this past May, he told me that he would like to show his appreciation for my working with him on his thesis, that he would like to give my web page a more professional look. He did not fault the content, just the bland linear format of my web page. I happily accepted his gift and in a couple of weeks he came up with a web page for me that is attractive, functional, and professional looking.

So, learning from Mr. Urban how to make a web page and to make it attractive, I decided to give it a try. Thus I practiced and produced the North Fork Baptist Church web page! I brought my laptop with me to church today and after the luncheon anyone who wants to can get a preview can do so. I will be updating it with photographs I received this weekend. And to prove how practical the web page can be, I have already put my notes for this sermon on your web page—just in case there is not enough time for me to cover all of my points before the luncheon. In that case you can finish the sermon later at home. So, now onto to the sermon.

While working on the North Fork web page I also turned my attention to organizing scanned photographs of family pictures from my childhood in the 1930s. Two photographs which came into focus became the catalyst for this sermon. One photo was a 2 x 2" snapshot of my father in 1940 sitting in front of the 1930's Philco radio in our living room. The other photo was of our next door neighbor, Jack Truman, an Englishman who in 1940 and 1941 came to our home almost every evening around 6:30 to listen to the radio commentators Gabriel Heater, H. V. Kaltenborn, and Lowell Thomas reporting on the bombing of London by the Germans.

The Blitz began on September 7, 1940, when the Nazis bombed London from 4 pm. to 6 pm., using 348 bombers and 617 fighter planes. Again, only two hours later, from 8 pm. to 4:30 am, the bomber and fighters continued the destruction of London. This blitz upon London continued for the next 57 consecutive days; and finally after six months of on-again / off-again bombing the blitz came to an end on May 11, 1941.

Jack Truman's mother was living in London throughout the blitz. Every night Jack Truman and my parents huddled around the Philco radio hoping that the neighborhood in London where Jack's mother lived would be spared or that she would be among the survivors. Seeing my parents and neighbor huddling around the radio, despising Hitler and his Luftwaffe, made a profound impression upon me as a nine/ten year old boy. As you might expect, I had come to hate Hitler and his airmen—Hitler and his henchmen!

My hatred for Hitler though was challenged one day back then by a neighbor lady (whose name I have forgotten) when I was sent to the grocery store across the alley from our home for some bread and milk. Mr. Morris Konig, the Jewish store keeper, and a devout Lutheran lady customer were engrossed in a conversation, a kind of debate actually, about Hitler's anti-Semitism, the destruction of Krystalnacht (the night of "broken glass" at Jewish stores and businesses), Hitler's deportation and killing of Jews, as well as the devastating blitz upon London. The conversation was so intense neither Mr. Konig or his Lutheran lady customer paid any attention to me as I waited to be waited on. The Lutheran lady tried to convince Mr. Konig that, according to the Bible, God had placed Hitler in power. She did not know why God did it, but she was sure God put him there for a good reason. Finally, I was noticed, and I was waited on. But, though only a nine-year old kid, I took home more than bread and milk. I took home my first theological dilemma: If God is good (as I prayed the grace before meals) how could Hitler be God's man for Germany? Or to put it another way, was the good and loving God actually responsible for Hitler's blitz upon London?

Only years later did I learn that Mr. Konig's Lutheran customer was alluding to Romans 13:1, the Scripture lesson for today—"For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.," and I Peter 2:13, "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish men. Live as free men, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as servants of God. Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. . . . Servants, be submissive to your masters."

And only in time did I learn that the theological dilemma which puzzled me as a nine year old has puzzled many believers, preachers, and theologians over the ages: Did God /does God really put tyrants and dictators on their thrones? And now, in the context of our national elections next week, will the winners—whoever they are—be able to claim in the spirit of Saint Paul, "I won! God's will has been done!"

If Paul's affirmations in Romans 13 were absolute, as proclaimed by many of Paul's royal and imperial interpreters, we would have only one flag hanging in the back wall of this church. It would be the British flag and a banner proclaiming the "Divine Right of Kings! Long live the king!" Good old King James—the "King James" responsible for the "King James Bible"—resolutely proclaimed his Divine Right to Rule.¹ And more recently in the 20th century the eldest grandchild of Queen Victoria, Kaiser Wilhelm II, in a speech at Konigsberg, on August 25, 1910, laid special stress upon the divine right by which the kings of Prussia ruled, stating in part, "considering myself as the instrument of the Lord, without heeding the views and opinions of the day, I go my way."

This matter of Paul's legitimating the Divine Right of Kings could be dismissed as so much past history, with no relevance for our world today were it not for the fact that Islam picked up Saint Paul's words and adapted them to its own agenda. In 1979, the Iranian cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini stated, "An Islamic government is government by Divine Right; its [*sharia*] laws cannot be changed, modified, or challenged!" Thus, some absolutist Islamic clerics arrogate to themselves the entitlements of power which the Apostle Paul bestowed upon Roman Emperors. And as a result, democracies have not blossomed in the Islamic Near East.

Let me briefly put Paul's statement in Romans 13 into its historical context by looking how the ideas of political rule changed in Israel over the centuries. From Moses to Micah there was the idea that Jehovah/Yahweh, was the ruler over Israel while other legitimate gods ruled over the Gentile / pagan nations. Note for example,

Deut 4:19. And beware lest you [Israelites] lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and worship them and serve them, [gods] which the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.

Deut 32:8-9. When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. For the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage.

Micah 4:5. For all the peoples walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God for ever and ever.

But this idea fostered a polytheistic understanding of reality: Gentiles worshiped "God-given gods." Israel worshiped the "god-giving God." The technical term for this was monolatry; it was not monotheism. In Psalm 82, in a short mini-drama of just eight verses, the psalmist proclaimed the end of this understanding of reality and announced an absolute monotheism and universalism.

Psalm 82:1 God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the **gods** he holds judgment: 2 "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? *Selah* 3 Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. 4 Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked." 5 They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken. 6 I say, "You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you; 7 nevertheless, you shall die like men, and fall like any prince." 8 Arise, O God, judge the earth; for to thee belong all the nations!

However, the psalmist of Psalm 82, did not get the last word in. Others in Israel insisted that the Lord Jehovah remained the ruler of Israel and Israel only! As for the Gentile nations, they were ruled over in the new order by angels or heavenly spirits, as found in

Jubilees 15:31-32 He chose Israel to be His people. 31. And He sanctified it, and gathered it from amongst all the children of men; for *there are many nations and many peoples, and all are His, and over all hath He placed **spirits** in authority to lead them astray from Him.* 32. *But over Israel He did not appoint any **angel or spirit**, for He alone is their ruler,* and He will preserve them and require them at the hand of His angels and His spirits, and at the hand of all His powers in order that He may preserve them and bless them, and that they may be His and He may be theirs from henceforth for ever.

Daniel 9:21-10:14 where the angels Michael and Gabriel are the patron angels of Judah and Persia.

However, in the Apocryphal **Wisdom of Solomon 3:1 and 3:8** it states that

the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. . . .They [the deceased saints] will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will reign over them for ever.

But the dominant idea became that divinely appointed earthly kings would be rulers of the nations at the pleasure of Almighty God. In the Wisdom of Solomon 6:1-3, it states,

Listen therefore, O **kings**, and understand; learn, O **judges** of the ends of the earth. Give ear, you that rule over multitudes, and boast of many nations. For your dominion was given you from the Lord, and your sovereignty from the Most High, who will search out your works and inquire into your plans.

Here then, long before Saint Paul, on the alleged authority of Solomon, was the announcement of the Divine Right of Kings.

But earthly kings had to pass a legitimacy test as expressed in the prayer of the psalmist:

Psalm 72:1 Give the king thy justice, O God, and thy righteousness to the royal son!
*2 May he judge thy people with righteousness, and thy **poor** with justice! 3 Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness! 4 May he defend the cause of the **poor** of the people, give deliverance to the **needy**, and crush the oppressor/extortioner! 5 May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations! 6 May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth! 7 In his days may righteousness flourish, and peace abound, till the moon be no more! 8 May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth! 9 May his foes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust! 10 May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! 11 May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him! 12 For he delivers the **needy** when he calls, the **poor** and him who has no helper. 13 He has pity on the **weak** and the **needy**, and saves the lives of the **needy**. 14 From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight. 15 Long may he live, may gold of Sheba be given to him! May prayer be made for him continually, and blessings invoked for him all the day! 16 May there be abundance of grain in the land; on the tops of the mountains may it wave; may its fruit be like Lebanon; and may men blossom forth from the cities like the grass of the field!*

However, the last word must really be given to the LORD Jehovah as found in Hosea 8:4, “*They made kings, but not through me, They set up princes, but without my knowledge.*” Israel and Judah, like many other nations, had their fair share of assassinations and coup d’etats, of war-lords and bad

kings But the LORD does not acknowledge their legitimacy, let alone take credit for their crowns!

Thus, I have finally resolved my theological dilemma of the past 65 years about the dictators, tyrants, war-lords, emperors, kings, queens, princes, potentates, and politicians who rule the 192 nations in the world today. First, I never quote Romans 13 without a footnote to Hosea 8. And then if the ruler under review cannot pass the legitimacy test of Psalm 72, I first quote Hosea 8:4 with a footnote then to Romans 13:1. I would invite you to consider doing the same.

AMEN.

NOTE

1.Kings are justly called Gods, for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of divine power upon earth. For if you will consider the attributes to God, you shall see how they agree in the person of a king. God has power to create, or destroy, make, or unmake at his pleasure, to give life, or send death, to judge all, and to be judged nor accountable to none: to raise low things, and to make high things low at his pleasure, and to God are both soul and body due. And the like power have Kings; they make and unmake their subjects: they have power of raising, and casting down: of life, and of death: judges over all their subjects, and in all causes, and yet accountable to none but God only. (James VI and I, *Works*, Chapter 20)