



Trump's top evangelical ally: God supports bombing North Korea

Pastor Robert Jeffress says the Bible gives the government "the authority to do whatever."

By Tara Isabella Burton

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People who listened to President Donald Trump's remarks after North Korea threatened to launch nuclear missiles at the US in the event of an American strike — in which Trump [threatened](#) that North Korean aggression would "be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen" — might be forgiven for thinking that the president's language sounded a little biblical.

A short time after Trump spoke Tuesday afternoon, one of his closest religious advisers made that link explicit. In a statement emailed to journalists Tuesday afternoon, pastor Robert Jeffress praised Trump's aggressive statement as a function of divine will. "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."

Jeffress has long been one of Trump's political allies, one central to Trump and his team's increasingly unsettling conflation of Christianity, nationalism, and pro-Trump cult of personality. Jeffress spoke at Trump's inauguration. In July, he [led a "Freedom Rally,"](#) during which he praised Trump as God's choice for America and a church choir sang a hymn with the lyrics "Make America Great Again," which is now available for pastors to download for their own worship services.

Jeffress also attended an impromptu White House [evangelical prayer meeting](#) last month, which, I previously argued, heralded a new age in church-state relations for the Trump administration. It was clear that Trump wasn't just appealing to evangelicals to fire up his voter base, but rather using the rhetoric of divinely ordained rule to delegitimize criticism from the mainstream media or even fellow Republicans.

Jeffress's comments Tuesday represent an intensification of that trend. The biblical verses from Romans that Jeffress alludes to aren't simply a legitimization of "just war" (itself a contested topic within the wider Christian tradition). They read in full:

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for

those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. (Romans 13:1-6, NRSV translation)

In other words, Jeffress isn't just saying that Trump has the right to go to war with North Korea. He's directly (if selectively) using the Bible to publicly advocate for Trump's right to rule by divine fiat — to do, essentially, whatever he wants to do. This isn't a personal expression of faith but a directly political one, designed to shape public discourse. This statement, after all, was emailed to journalists by Jeffress's PR firm.

Romans 13 has certainly been used to bolster evangelical support for war in the past. For example, Richard Land, then-president of the Southern Baptist Convention's policy arm, used the verses to defend George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq [during an NPR](#) interview in 2003, even as he recognized the SBC's position was more hawkish than that of other evangelicals. But Jeffress's close proximity to the president, and his history of making pro-authoritarian statements more generally, makes this particular application all the more loaded.

In a [follow-up interview](#) with the Washington Post's Sarah Pulliam Bailey, Jeffress doubled down on his words: “[Those verses in the Book of Romans give] the government ... the authority to do whatever, whether it's assassination, capital punishment or evil punishment to quell the actions of evildoers like Kim Jong Un.”

But whether or not Trump ultimately deals with North Korea as “decisively” as Jeffress would wish is almost irrelevant to the import of Jeffress's words. The very fact that Jeffress is using his position as de facto White House evangelical spokesperson — a position Trump seems all too keen to allow him — to argue in the public sphere that God has granted a leader to do “whatever” is more worrying still.