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DENOMINATIONAL BROADCAST
OF THE REFORMED CHURCHES
OF AUSTRALIA

FOR THOSE WHO GOVERN

He is God's servant. . . .

Romans 13:4

As the new government takes its place in the United States, it does so with what appears to be an extraordinary mandate from the people. All over the world, national leaders were deeply impressed when America swung dramatically toward a somewhat more conservative side of the political spectrum. Helmut Schmidt, chancellor of Germany, said that he felt that the elections last November signaled a new mood in the country; possibly a mood of greater decisiveness. Mr. Schmidt spoke for many others.

In terms of the electoral vote, the new president of the United States can congratulate himself as one of seven presidents of this century who could claim a landslide victory. Franklin Delano Roosevelt enjoyed four landslide victories, but only one of his was greater than Ronald Reagan's ninety-one percent of the electoral votes. Compared to President Carter's slightly over 1,000,000 plurality of votes cast, Reagan's 8,300,000 plurality is extremely impressive.

The great change in the nation appears to be widespread and deep. Not only has the swing been expressed on the executive level of the federal government, but Congress itself has been changed a great deal. The Senate now has a Republican majority—the net gain there of eleven Republicans was a big surprise; the House, too, shows a net gain of Republicans—thirty-three. On the state level, the conservatives picked up a gain of four more governors; and state legislatures also show the impact of the swing to the right.

For the Americans themselves, and for those who observe them from other shores, the stunning run-away victory of a more conservative political position constitutes a clear mandate from the people, and those who take office now feel an enormous pressure to deliver in terms of popular expectations. According to analysts, the desire for change expressed by the large majority vote is rooted in misgivings regarding the direction of the economy. Soaring interest rates

and unchecked inflation have driven fear into many hearts. The vote for a change was a call to government to get some new economic machinery moving in order to reverse the destructive directions now pursued. The new president and those close to him have publicly expressed their misgivings regarding their ability to deliver up to the expectations of those who have put them in office.

Without question there will be many disappointed people in the months ahead; in fact, it is possible that the measure of voter enthusiasm for the new president and for those who have been placed in other elective offices may be the measure as well of the disillusionment which will sweep the land in the near future. For the new government takes office in circumstances which are not easily corrected; our problems have developed a certain amount of momentum which will not easily be neutralized. Moreover, there is some evidence that some of our problems are unsolvable, and we are simply going to have to learn to live with them. Not all social and economic problems are solvable, after all; not all personal problems are either—mature people know this; but the public, the voters, often act as if they do not know it.

Some of the new president's supporters were extremely disappointed in his announcement some time ago that his promise to work for the securing of tax credits for those who send their children to non-public schools will have to be put on the back burner for the present. Right now tax cuts are more important, according to the president's aides, and these tax cuts may well help those parents anyway. For now, tax credits for non-public school tuition seems to be dead. I say, many are disappointed in this. But this is just an example of the kinds of disappointment that will be registered in various sectors of the voting population as the new government attempts to live up to the great expectations of the people, but will doubtlessly not be fully successful.

Within the next few weeks, the world will watch as the new government begins to express itself in terms of the realities of the political scene, in terms of the promises made to the electorate, in terms of the ac-

tual ability of those elected to do the job they have said they would do, and in terms of the responsiveness of the government to the will of the people. Obviously there are several dynamic factors at work as the government moves forward. And with those that I have mentioned, there are many of us who feel that there is one factor which overarches all the rest—that is, God and His will. The government also must respond to the will of God; and the government, whether it realizes it or not, is part of God's great action in the world today. The book of Proverbs says that God directs the heart of the king wherever He pleases (Proverbs 21:1). God is in the picture, too. On the eve of the inauguration of a new president for America, let's examine what the Bible says about those who rule, and let us notice how the Bible describes their responsibilities.

Because of the unusual voter support of the new government, we would be inclined now to expect that those who take office and those who are already in office will necessarily be exceptionally responsive to the new mood among the electorate. It has been pointed out, for example, that the House of Representatives, which does not actually have a majority of members from the party of the new president, will be very sympathetic to the new president's proposals because every member of the House has heard the message from the people. Therefore everyone knows that if they do not take the new interest in conservatism seriously their political future will be in danger. We can all understand this reasoning, and to a large extent Christian people do expect that elected governing officials will be very responsive to the people.

But those who know the Bible well, and hopefully there are many in the new government who do, should also be aware of the fact that those who govern are not ultimately responsible to the people. They have another, superior, responsibility: their responsibility to God Himself. I realize that this is a rather strange note to interject into our thought patterns just now when we all are filled with anticipation as we wait to see what will happen in Washington; Americans are expectant, and their neighbors to the south and north

along with other nations of the world are curious. The Bible, however, certainly does emphasize that those who govern are not first of all servants of the people, but they are servants of God.

In the thirteenth chapter of the book of Romans, we find a somewhat detailed description of significant biblical ideas regarding government. These are expressed in connection with the Bible's urging of Christian people to give the government full support. When one remembers the often anti-Christian policies of the government at the time these words were written, it is astonishing that this strong call to obedience was expressed at all. Notice what the Bible says here in Romans 13, and be especially alert to the way the Bible describes the responsibilities of governing officials.

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. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, 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; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer (vv. 1-4).

That material from the book of Romans exalts the institutions of government, possibly much more than we are inclined to do. Among us there is a great deal of cynicism regarding government and some of this is justified because of the improper conduct of some of those who hold high office. But there is nothing wrong with government as such: it is a holy institution which can be ranged alongside of marriage, the family, the schools. . . . Government is a God-ordained element of human society which has a very specific function. I'll talk about that function a bit later; for now, I want to stress the Bible's high evaluation of government.

In close connection with its exalted view of government, Romans 13 calls government officials servants of God. This term is used twice in the few sentences you just read from that chapter. A government official is a *servant of the Lord*. And so it is entirely appropriate that when a new president is sworn in, he is asked to place his hand on a Bible and to swear to God that he will uphold the Constitution of the land. When he does that, he not only indicates the great seriousness with which he takes on his high office, but hopefully he also acknowledges that the God of the Bible now holds him responsible for the conduct of his office.

Now there are many people who simply do not understand what in the world I am saying when I point out that the Bible views those who govern as men and women who are responsible to Almighty God. We must recognize that those who take the oath of office during the next few days will include only a minority of people who consciously seek to serve the God of the Bible. Some of them could well be atheists; some only nominal believers who have never committed their lives to the service of the Lord. In the light of this, what practical difference does it make that the Bible calls government a God-ordained institution and calls governing officials the servants of the Lord. If they and most people never think of government and themselves in these terms, we might just as well forget this biblical description of government and act as if it was never written.

Not so. The fact that government is God-ordained is important.

First of all, those who are Christians are able to observe that, even though government officials do not actually realize that they are servants of God, God nevertheless uses them to further His goals and purposes. When Romans 13 was written, the government was not in the least Christian. However, Romans 13 points out that even so the institution of government was functioning to keep peace within the empire; it punished wrongdoers. There were times when the government of that age turned on the Christian community, and this made it very difficult for Chris-

tian people to describe their relationships to the government, but for the most part, then, and throughout history, government has held back the destructive power of anarchy, and has maintained a semblance of law and order in the land.

It is for this reason that it is possible for us today to travel throughout the world with a measure of safety, even to countries where Christianity is outlawed. On the other hand, within countries where the government is very fragile, and we never know who will be in power from one day to the next, it is very difficult to do business and to travel freely. Government, even non-Christian government, is a tool in the hand of God to preserve peace and tranquility within a nation.

Secondly, the facts that government was instituted by God and that those who govern are servants of God provide Christian citizens with strong incentive to pray for those who govern. Prayer and government go together, no matter how much the anti-prayer and atheistic lobbies protest. It is entirely appropriate for functions of government to be heavily fortified by prayer; thus the prayers at the opening of congressional sessions and the prayer breakfasts and other prayer events which have recently been initiated in connection with government are necessary.

But even more important than the formal prayers often associated with governmental functions are the prayers of those faithful people who know the Bible's view of government. As I said, many people who are part of government are themselves unaware of the exalted nature of government, and they are not aware either that they are servants of the Lord. But God-fearing citizens know this, and so they must be continuously in prayer for those who govern them. They must pray that the actions of those who govern will be actions that truly further the great designs of the Lord. Certainly, they should also pray that those who govern them will themselves have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And of course this can happen. It is always possible that those who were formerly indifferent to the things of God can be influenced through the Holy Spirit to live closer to God

and to His sacred Word, the Bible.

And then, thirdly, the fact that government is instituted by God and the fact that governing officials are servants of the Lord—these facts give those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and who have been influenced by His Word, the Bible, the right and the duty to press the claims of God in connection with government.

What does this mean? Well, it means that the great biblical goals of government must be pressed upon the government today. I am thinking of the goal of justice. Anyone reading the Bible will be deeply impressed with the incessant stress found in it on the necessity of preserving justice. Anyone who thinks that the Bible is solely about the future life obviously has not read it.

The Bible is about just weights and measures. It is about fair pay and just taxation. It is about treatment of laborers and responsible service to employers. It is about protection of human life. It is about the punishment of evildoers, and it is about encouragement for the honest and industrious. It is about the maintenance of an environment in which true freedom of religion can be exercised. It is about proper relationships with other countries. It is about the way children should be educated. And it is about the way the poor and the indigent should be cared for. I could go on. I mention these biblical concerns simply to emphasize that the Scripture provides us with significant insights regarding many affairs in which the government these days is directly involved. Christians know this, and they must earnestly and persistently bring the biblical perspective to the attention of those who govern.

This does not mean that the government must be brought into the service of one religious persuasion or another. Not at all. Christians must be careful that they do not elevate denominational idiosyncrasies to the level of great universal moral laws. But there are great universal moral laws in the Bible, and Christians should be intelligent enough to be able to discern which these are, and they should be courageous enough to do all in their power to enable

the government to express the great biblical principles of justice and righteousness.

And with all this, the facts—that the government has been ordained by God and that those who govern are the servants of God—mean that those who govern must be encouraged to keep their place. I mentioned that I was going to talk about the function, the task of government, in this message. Well, the task of government is limited. God has ordained government and has made those who govern His servants, but God has not ordained government only; He has not determined that government would be the great umbrella institution to which all men and other institutions must bow. No. God has ordained other institutions as well: the home, the church, the school, even art and science, as well as others.

Government's task, according to the Bible, is very specific. Romans 13 talks about government especially in connection with its peace-keeping task; it specifically mentions the power of the sword. In 1 Timothy 2 where the Bible calls for prayers on behalf of rulers, it speaks of government as the agency that makes it possible for us to live a quiet and a peaceable life, "godly and respectful in every way." The situation we now have, in which the government extends its regulations and influence into practically every area of life, is not supported by Scripture.

The government, for example, may not establish regulations for the family; but the government must insure that society will be so regulated that fathers and mothers and children may benefit from the opportunity of developing the full potential of their families. Another area in which government influence must diminish rather than increase is the area of education. Many assume that education is a state responsibility. It is not. Though the government must establish certain educational standards for its citizenry, the government does not have the right to determine which values will be included in education and which will be excluded. This is happening today, and it represents a misunderstanding of the role of government. I mention these things to point out that it is important that those who govern understand

that their God-ordained role is not all-embracing, and those who understand the Scriptures must reinforce this understanding in their minds.

As the new government takes its place in the United States, it is probably especially important to emphasize that government is ordained by God and that those who govern are servants of God. I say that this is especially important now because so many are impressed with the exceptional mandate which the new government has received. The mandate is impressive, and it provides the new government with special advantages and unique responsibilities. Even so, it must be stressed that in the final analysis those who govern are not responsible to those who have elected them. The process of a democratic election is an extremely fine way to bring about governmental change; but it is a way to bring to office individuals whose ultimate responsibility is to God, not to the people who have elected them. However strange this sounds and however many may disagree with it, those whose views of government are determined by the Bible, and not by men must use this moment in history to underscore this profoundly biblical point of view.

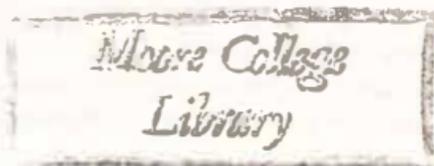
So to you who occupy the high places of government, we who follow Christ pledge our support and respect. And we take this occasion to assure you that our evaluation of you and of your offices will continue to be determined by the Scriptures. Thus, we will pray for you with fervor, asking God to sustain you physically, emotionally, and mentally; to endow you with wisdom and prudence; and to sustain your souls with the presence of His Holy Spirit. For those among you who are not yet followers of our Savior, we will continue to pray for conversion; for those who confess such faith but who have failed to live fully out of it, we will pray for a deepening of allegiance to Christ and a quickening of courage. And we assure all of you that we will continuously press the cause of justice and righteousness upon the government so that all citizens may enjoy the benefits of a peaceful society.

PRAYER

Almighty God, after whom all the families of heaven and earth are named, we hold before you the persons of those whom you have called to govern. So work in their hearts that they may know and understand that you are their God and that they are responsible to serve you. We pray for the conversion of those who have never committed themselves to you and to your Son Jesus. Endow with your wisdom and discernment all those who are in high places. Enable them to withstand the pressures of public office and use them to further your cause.

And now we unite with people throughout the world in prayer for the new president of the United States. We know that what he does in office will be important not only for his land but for many other lands as well—lands whose destinies are tied into the destiny of the United States. Overcome his weaknesses, neutralize his faults, and utilize his strengths to accomplish your great purposes. Nurture the faith in Christ that is found in his heart so that he may, through the strengthening of your Holy Spirit, pursue the cause of righteousness and justice. Strengthen him for the rigors of his office.

In the name of Christ, Amen.



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