

Robert Jeffress on God, Trump and North Korea: A pastor explains his politics

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DALLAS (RNS)—Anyone who knows the Bible shouldn't take issue with the idea God has given President Trump authority to take out North Korea's dictator, said Pastor Robert Jeffress, the Dallas megachurch leader who drew sharp rebukes for stating just that.

Jeffress sat down for an interview after his sermon Aug. 13, just days after his words made headlines around the world. Christians and non-Christians accused him of exacerbating an already alarming war of words between Trump and the temperamental, young leader of nuclear-armed North Korea.



President Trump (left) is greeted by Pastor Robert Jeffress of Dallas at the Celebrate Freedom Rally on July 1 in Washington, D.C. (Photo by Yuri Gripas/Reuters via RNS) Critics

overreacted, said Jeffress, lead pastor of First Baptist in Dallas, whose public observances on current events have made him a target—and not for the first time. A public pastor with the president’s ear, Jeffress, 61, does not shy away from sharing his belief that Scripture should undergird politics and diplomacy.

“What I said was that the Bible has given government the authority to use whatever force necessary, including assassination or war, to topple an evil dictator like Kim Jong-Un,” said Jeffress, elaborating on an Aug. 8 statement in which he said God has given Trump “authority to take out Kim Jong-Un.”

“That authority comes from Romans 13. Paul said that government has been established by God to be an avenger of those who practice evil,” Jeffress said in an Aug. 13 interview with Religion News Service. “I made it very clear that Romans 12 says we are to forgive one another when people offend us—don’t repay evil for evil, but overcome evil with good.

“But in Romans 13, Paul isn’t talking about individual Christians. He’s talking about government. Government is an organization God uses to bring vengeance against those who practice evil.”

Jeffress said his statement wasn’t the same as saying that “God ordained President Trump to nuke North Korea.”

Widespread negative reaction

But many thought it came too close.

Dallas Morning News columnist Robert Wilonsky questioned “how a man whose calling is supposed to be that of peace could so fervently proselytize in favor of war.”

In a *National Review* piece, Mark Tooley, president of the Institute on

Religion and Democracy, criticized Jeffress' "bellicosity."

And *Christianity Today* editor-in-chief Mark Galli penned an editorial titled "The Use of Nuclear Weapons is Inherently Evil." After naming Jeffress, Galli wrote: "One would hope that Christian supporters of the president's views would at least qualify and nuance their statements."

North Korea did not come up in Jeffress' public comments Aug. 13 at First Baptist, a Southern Baptist congregation that claims 13,000 members and occupies six city blocks on a \$135 million campus at the heart of downtown Dallas.

'The ultimate answer is the transformed heart'

The pastor—whose sermon focused on Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples in Luke 22—said he felt compelled to address the violent clashes between white supremacist groups and counter-protesters that left three dead in Charlottesville, Va.



Pastor Robert Jeffress preaches at First Baptist Church in Dallas. (Photo courtesy of First Baptist Dallas via RNS) “Whether it’s immorality, or racism that we’ve seen on display in Charlottesville this week, the ultimate answer is the transformed heart that comes from knowing Jesus Christ,” the pastor told the congregation.

Jeffress grew up in First Baptist Church of Dallas, which will celebrate its 150th anniversary next year. As a boy, he gained spiritual insight from the late W.A. Criswell, First Baptist’s preacher for half a century.

“When I was 5, I started to become interested in becoming a Christian,” said Jeffress, who has served as senior pastor 10 years. “My dad brought me down to Dr. Criswell’s office, and he presented the gospel, and I accepted Christ as my Savior here.”

Not shying away from controversy

While a popular figure at his home congregation, Jeffress is no stranger to controversy outside First Baptist’s walls.

In 2011, he suggested at the Values Voter Summit that Republican Mitt Romney, a Mormon, was part of a “theological cult.”

In 2014, he wrote a book, *Perfect Ending*, that claimed then-President Obama’s support for same-sex marriage was clearing the way for the Antichrist.

Jeffress’ North Korea statement came after Trump warned North Korea would “be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen” if its leader kept threatening the U.S. In July, North Korea successfully tested an intercontinental ballistic missile that could reach California.

“I believe that the job of a pastor, a preacher of God’s word, is to share what God is saying about issues that are confronting people today,” Jeffress said in the Aug. 13 interview. “The Bible teaches us how to be saved, and to go to heaven, but it tells us more than that.

“It tells us how we are to live in the world, as well. So, whether the issue is the use of force and dealing with an evil dictator, or dealing with racism in this country, I think the job of a pastor is to share what God’s word says.”

‘He takes it right from the Bible’

Patsy Cato, a Dallas real estate agent who has attended First Baptist seven years, said she, like her pastor, voted for Trump.

“We prayed morning, noon and night, and God put him there,” she said. “It could have very well gone the other way, but we prayed, and now he’s there.”

Trump, who identifies as Presbyterian, has embraced white evangelicals and won their support despite concerns about his personal character. He has embraced issues important to them, such as opposition to abortion. More than 80 percent of white evangelicals voted for Trump, according to exit polls.

But Cato said politics—and her pastor’s relationship with Trump—has nothing to do with why she likes Jeffress.

“He doesn’t teach a message that’s about things other than the word of God,” she said. “That’s my favorite part. If you sit in his message, he takes it right from the Bible, and that’s it. That’s why I come here.”

Either ignorance or unbelief

Jeffress says those who doubt his message fall into two camps—“either people who are ignorant of what the Bible says or people who don’t believe what the Bible says.

“But if you had listened to some of the Christian pacifists we’re hearing today in World War II, when Hitler was marching toward world domination, we would all be speaking German and saying ‘Heil Hitler,’” he continued.

“I know President Trump wants a diplomatic solution,” the pastor added. “But if diplomacy fails, he has the God-given authority to use force to remove an evil dictator.”