

Chapter 2: The Bible on the Role of Government

Most Biblical episodes involving human government are rather ugly. Foremost, sin can be viewed as our failed attempts at self-governance-- outside of God's will. As such, the Bible records the opening of our history-- Adam and Eve's disastrous failure to self-govern properly. In Genesis 4, we are told that the family tradition of poor self-governance continued when Cain killed Abel. Interestingly, Cain then left the presence of the Lord and built a city-- a center of human government.¹

Government in the Old Testament

Government and the Israelites

From there, Biblical encounters with formal government are relatively non-descript until the book of Exodus tells us that the Israelites were brutally oppressed by Pharaoh before being delivered from Egypt through Moses by God's hand.² After God rules through Joshua to establish the Israelites in Canaan, God chooses to work through judges to govern His people. The book of Judges highlights the Israelites' repeated failures to follow God and recounts how judges were empowered by God to deliver His people from the bondage and oppression that had resulted from their disobedience.

After a time, the Israelites began to grow dissatisfied with this form of divine government, and under Samuel, they clamored for a human king. They wanted a king "like other nations...to govern us and go out before us and fight our battles."³ They wanted to be ruled-- by someone other than God, and they wanted someone to fight their battles for them. God identified their desire as a rejection of Him and His way and then told Samuel to "solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."⁴ His subsequent speech to the Israelites in I Samuel 8:11-18 remains one of the great descriptions of the abuse of power, and too often, the standard for human government:

"...he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots....He will take the best of your fields and your vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers....the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day."

Samuel warned the people that the king would use their sons for his military. And in a perverse twist on "putting others first," their sons would run ahead of his chariots! The people would be subject to heavy taxation and slavery. The king would take 10% (if only it

were so little today!), but more importantly, he would take their best-- what should have been set apart for God.⁵

The people were not persuaded by Samuel's reasoning; their response was a determined refusal to follow Samuel and God. Saul, the new king, had a promising start, but after he was disobedient twice, God withdrew His support. The rest of Saul's rule-- a waiting period to establish the credentials and develop the character of David-- was marked by inconsistency, fits of jealousy, and a penchant for using force on his opponents. His successor, King David ruled well in general-- as "a man after God's own heart," but the quality of the subsequent kings mostly degenerated from Solomon through the kings of Israel and Judah.⁶ Only a few of the later kings ruled well, most notably Josiah. But by then, the country had degenerated so far that the priests and the people had completely forgotten about God's Law.⁷

Israelite "Adultery" with Government

A believer's relationship with God is frequently described in the Bible as a marriage.⁸ The unfaithfulness of the Israelites in their relationship with God-- by worshipping other gods-- is graphically portrayed as committing a variety of sexual sins.⁹ Likewise, various alliances with the governments of foreign powers were condemned by the prophets as "adultery"-- seeking sustenance and security from an entity other than God, depending on man instead of God. As Isaiah preached, "Stop trusting in man, who has but a breath in his nostrils. Of what account is he?"¹⁰

Isaiah 20:5-6 condemns Israel who "trusted in Cush and boasted in Egypt." Isaiah 30:1-3 announces a "woe to (God's) obstinate children" for "forming an alliance...looking for help to Pharaoh's protection, in Egypt's shade for refuge." Isaiah 31:1 pronounces another warning: "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel." And in the most sexually graphic language in the Bible, for the same sins, Ezekiel 23 condemns their prostitution, lust, nakedness, promiscuity and lewdness, and predicts their resulting "defilement."¹¹

Samuel closed his sermon about the dangers of having a king with an ominous warning: God would not respond to them when (not if) they cried out to Him about their choice of government. In Judges 10:10-14, God initially refused to help the oppressed Israelites. Instead, He said "go and cry out to the gods you have chosen; let them deliver you in your time of distress." In II Chronicles 12:8, God said His people would become subject to an enemy king "so that they may learn the difference between serving me and serving the kings of other lands."

As G. Campbell Morgan notes: God gave them a king so that "they might learn the folly of their choice. In this is revealed a constant method of the Divine government. When men fail to rise to the height of the purpose of God, and clamor for something lower, He gives them

what they ask, and then watches over them and guards them as they work out their low choice to its ultimate conclusion, and thus are eventually brought back to His purpose with a full understanding of its perfection."¹² Similarly, in Romans 1:24-28, concerning godless and wicked men, we are told that God “gave them up” to the desires of their hearts. Given the desires of many Christians throughout the 20th century to use government-- to provide security and sustenance, to enforce moral standards, and so on-- and Christian disappointment with contemporary government policy, perhaps God has “given us up” to our gods as well.¹³

Government in the New Testament

Christ and the Temptation of Government

Christ's earthly opponents tempted him to say things that would get him in trouble with the Roman government. Christ's response to one such question-- that one should “give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God, what is God's” is probably the most famous Biblical remark concerning Christians and government.¹⁴ Notably, Christ was answering a question intended to trap him “so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor”-- they were hoping to use the power of the State to stop his ministry¹⁵

In Matthew 4, we are told about the three temptations that Christ faced before beginning his ministry in earnest.¹⁶ Satan tempted Christ to “tell these stones to become bread.” But Christ rejected that suggestion, citing the larger issue: “Man does not live on bread alone but on every word...of God.” In addition to his personal hunger, by extension, Christ also faced an ongoing “social” temptation-- to end all hunger by turning stones into bread or to seize popularity or political power with a food give-away. Christ could have diminished income inequality through miracles or bought the allegiance of people with hand-outs, but he didn't. Although dealing with “felt needs” is important, Christ showed us that it must be kept in a proper perspective with God's agenda and a focus on the Gospel. Likewise, our “quick fix” solutions often are outside of God's will-- because there are unintended consequences or because the means to the end are not appropriate.

Satan also tried to tempt Christ with inappropriate religious means, suggesting that Christ throw himself off the top of the Temple so that angels would rescue him. Christ refused this method of sensationalism and “church growth.” Satan also proposed a political temptation, but Christ refused to rule through traditional government institutions, replying that we are to worship God and serve Him alone.¹⁷ Here, the broader implication of this question for us is whether we worship, serve, and depend on government-- or God alone.

Christ was often tempted to push the timing of God's plan and especially to substitute another, less divine agenda-- to establish an earthly kingdom. At the end of his life, the temptations were the same-- to avoid the cross, to call down angels to help him, and so on. Notably, at Gethsamene, Peter inappropriately uses force by engaging in sword play, cutting off a servant's ear. Christ's rebuke of Peter probably has broader application to Christian

proposals for the use of force and government: "all who draw the sword will die by the sword."

It is also noteworthy that the recorded temptations of Christ all relate in some way to pursuing seemingly reasonable yet inappropriate means and ends. Further, we are not told about any of the other temptations that we know Christ must have faced. As John Yoder notes: "Being human, Jesus must have been subject somehow or other to the testings of pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust; but it does not enter into the concerns of the Gospel writers to give us any information about any struggles he may have had with their attraction."¹⁸ It is probably true that Satan thought the social, religious, and political temptations were pivotal. It is definitely true that God and the divinely-inspired Gospel writers viewed these as the most important and dangerous of the temptations Christ faced. It seems likely that God meant to convey their gravity for us as well.

In addition to eschewing the temptation to use earthly government, Christ was critical of the methods of earthly rulers and told his disciples not to follow in their footsteps. In Matthew 20:25-26, Christ said "you know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you." Luke 22:25-26 adds that the officials called themselves "Benefactors." Notably, government's use of force is frequently accompanied by the claim that it is helping those who are forced to do something they wouldn't have done otherwise.

The Israelites and the disciples had expected the Messiah to be a political leader, but Christ had an entirely different agenda.¹⁹ Somehow, today's Christians fall into an eerily similar position, at least implicitly believing that Christ's words and actions do not at all discourage the use of government. Their chief argument is that this tool was unavailable to him in the contemporary Roman political structure. However, the "cultural" argument is at worst, disingenuous or dangerous-- or at best, unsatisfying. First, Christ was offered political power and refused it. Second, Christ could have taken actions to ensure a substantial degree of economic and political power, but didn't. Third, if the use of government was supposed to be an important tool in the Christian arsenal, a God who is sovereign over history could have sent Christ at a different, more democratic, time. And finally, any "cultural" argument is potentially dangerous since it opens the door for its use on a wider variety of issues.

Christ told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. Otherwise my followers would fight."²⁰ Apparently, this statement and the rest of Christ's ministry reflect God's will-- in order to protect and extend the integrity of the gospel. Is it the same today? Are we arrogant for claiming that we can use government effectively and appropriately? Up to this point, I have not at all proven that Christians should avoid using government as a tool in any given context. But at the least, theological and Biblical integrity require that we reflect long and hard on whether the principles that governed Christ's ministry are true today. Certainly, some burden of proof should be on those who wish to use government to try to accomplish godly

goals.

In Scripture, Christ only mentions the most powerful man in the world (Caesar) once. But when looking at Christ's life, we cannot say that we should ignore politics or politicians. Christ warned the disciples about the Herodians and the politically-astute Sadducees. And he did not avoid personal contact with individuals from the ruling social, religious, or political classes. Christ was anti-Religion, yet befriended Nicodemus; he was anti-Politics, yet befriended tax collectors and the Roman centurion. They were identified with oppressive institutions, yet Christ dignified and respected them independent of their career choices.

Perhaps most important, Christians should soberly recognize that it was the State along with religious authorities that put Christ to death and has made martyrs out of many of his followers. That Christ was killed by a combination of the religious and state authorities is no accident. Thankfully, John 19:10-11 records that Pilate did not have the ultimate authority to forcefully take his life; Christ willingly gave it for our salvation.²¹

The Writings of the Apostles on Christians and Government

The rest of the New Testament also displays a surprising lack of interest in political issues. There were no political protests or calls for the government to prohibit abortion and slavery, gambling and sodomy, to expand government programs to feed the poor, and so on. The complete absence of Biblical text devoted to these topics is astounding given the level of rhetoric and the number of proposals for activist government from both ends of the contemporary Christian political spectrum today.

That said, the apostles did write a good deal about our relationship to political authorities. Romans 13:1-7 instructs all believers to “submit to the governing authorities.” Moreover, Paul said that these authorities are established by God, and thus, that rebellion against authority is equivalent to rebellion against God. In I Peter 2:13-17, Peter instructs us to submit ourselves to every authority “for God's sake.” These are provocative passages, especially in light of their recommended submission to Nero-- a pagan ruler who inflicted substantial persecution on the early church. Apparently, submission to God-established authority shows faith in God's sovereignty over rulers-- that God is working through, or in spite of, our leaders.

In I Timothy 2:1-3, Paul's first instructions to Timothy about worship are for believers to pray, intercede, and give thanks for “all those in authority.” Paul then points to the reason for this: “that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”²² Although Paul was quite willing to rankle his religious foes, he recommended the pursuit of tranquility in political matters. Paul concludes by saying this approach is “good, and pleases God.”

The Romans 13 passage concludes by telling us to pay our taxes and to give honor and respect where it is due.²³ The I Peter 2 passage closes with a command to “fear God [and]

honor the king.” In Luke 12:4-5, Christ tells his followers to fear God but “not [to] be afraid of those who kill the body but can do no more.” Thus, we are supposed to honor and respect both God and our rulers, but God's authority takes precedence. Both intuitively and from Scripture, the line is drawn where submission to the State interferes with our submission to God.²⁴ The early church battled this often-- two examples are chronicled in Acts, the most famous of which is the retort by Peter and the other apostles: “We must obey God rather than men.”²⁵ When there is no conflict, we are to submit to the State; when the two conflict, our primary allegiance is to God.²⁶

Finally, the first Beast and Babylon-- spoken of so harshly in Revelation-- are most likely representations of human power and government. Revelation 13:8,14 probably speaks to (false) religion encouraging the worship of the State. Revelation 2:10, 13:7, and 16:14 speak to the State warring against God and His people. Revelation 17 prophesies the destruction of Babylon. And Revelation 19:20 and Isaiah 30:33 speak to the end of State power. As the two beasts in Revelation 13 underline, the combination of the Devil, false religion, and the State can be dragon-like (emphasizing power) or more serpent-like (emphasizing deception and idolatry). And perhaps most sobering, the only warning in Revelation to Christians-- outside of the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2-3-- is the call to leave Babylon and its enticements in chapters 18.

Scripture speaks at great length about the problems with human government-- from the agenda at Babel in Genesis 11, to the staggering warning about kings in I Samuel 8, to the repeated idolatry of the Israelites toward government and in its anticipation of a political messiah throughout the Old Testament, to the temptations of Christ in Matthew 4, to the meaning of the first beast of Revelation 13. In a word, the sum of the Biblical evidence indicates that we should be leery about attempting to harness the power of government.²⁷ And before we criticize political leaders or even think about using government for whatever purpose, a prerequisite is that we do first what the Bible has explicitly prescribed concerning government-- in particular, giving thanks and praying for our leaders.²⁸

Notes

1. Augustine: “It is recorded of Cain that he built a city, which Abel, as though he were merely a pilgrim on earth, built none. For the true City of the saints is in heaven, though here on earth it produces citizens in whom it wanders as on a pilgrimage through time looking for the Kingdom of eternity.” (*City of God*, New York: Doubleday, 1958, p. 325) For a comprehensive and balanced discussion of cities, see: D. Hay, *Economics Today*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989, p. 42-43.

2. The earlier episodes: Abraham with Pharaoh (Genesis 12), in the battle of the kings (Genesis 14), and with Abimelech (Genesis 20-21); Lot's apparent position in Sodom's government (Genesis 19:1); Isaac with Abimelech (Genesis 26); and Joseph with Potiphar and Pharaoh (Genesis 39-50).

3. I Samuel 8:5,19-20. As G. Campbell Morgan notes: "They asked for a king like the nations. Their glory and their power had consisted in their unlikeness to the nations in this very fact." (Life Applications from Every Chapter of the Bible, Grand Rapids: Revell, 1994, p. 3.)

4. I Samuel 8:9.

5. There is a story about an American joking with an Englishman about winning the Revolutionary War. The Englishman asked why the war was fought. The American replied: "taxation without representation." The Brit quipped, "OK, so how do you like it *with* representation?" Just as Americans today bear a much larger burden of government than the Colonialists, the Israelites would learn God's lesson the hard way.

6. The Northern Kingdom failed to produce a single godly ruler; the Southern Kingdom's record was decidedly mixed.

7. II Kings 22-23.

8. See: Ezekiel 16:8, Hosea 2:16,19-20; for Christ and the Church, see: Ephesians 5:21-33, Revelation 20:7-9.

9. See: Ezekiel 16 and Revelation 18.

10. Isaiah 2:22. See also: Psalm 118:9, 146:3.

11. See especially: Ezekiel 23:20. See also: II Kings 15:19-20, 17:3 for examples and Jeremiah 46:25, Hosea 5:13, 7:8-11, and Lamentations 5:6 for other references. In addition to idolatry, relying on those who have at best divided interests and loyalties is impractical. As Machiavelli noted, in such cases, "ruin is only deferred as long as the assault is postponed...The cause of this is that they have no love or other motive to keep them in the field beyond a trifling wage, which is not enough to make them ready to die for you." (The Prince, New York: Penguin, 1980, p. 73.)

12. Morgan, p. 80.

13. Lawrence Adams: "The growing disappointment of the American people with national government follows their high expectations for it and their dependence upon it. As noted, Americans still expect the national government to be primarily responsible for the solution of national problems-- meaning that Americans may lack a robust sense of the importance of other institutions." (Going Public: Christian Responsibility in a Divided America, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002, p. 122.)

14. Luis Lugo notes that "give" is more properly translated "render," implying that to which Caesar was rightfully entitled. ("Caesar's Coin and the Politics of the Kingdom: A Pluralist Perspective", in Caesar's Coin Revisited: Christians and the Limits of Government, ed. M. Cromartie, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996, p. 8.) John MacArthur notes that Christ changed the word that Pharisees had used for their question to emphasize the point (Why Government Can't Save You: An Alternative to Political Activism, Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000, p. 61.)

15. Luke 20:20,25.

16. See also: Luke 4.

17. In his definition of Satan, Ambrose Bierce relates a fictional dialogue between God and Satan. "Satan made himself multifariously objectionable and was finally expelled from Heaven. Halfway in his descent he paused, bent his head in thought a moment and at last went back.

Satan: 'There is one favor that I should like to ask.'

God: 'Name it.'

Satan: 'Man, I understand, is about to be created. He will need laws.'

God: 'What, wretch! You his appointed adversary, charged from the dawn of eternity with hatred of his soul-- you ask for the right to make his laws?'

Satan: 'Pardon; what I have to ask is that he be permitted to make them himself.'

It was so ordered."

18. J. Yoder, The Politics of Jesus, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, p. 98. See also: Hebrews 4:15.

19. See: John 6:15. "Jesus didn't seize political power, whether it was offered to him by Satan or his followers. He didn't run for Congress or try to pass laws...the way God changes his world [is] through servanthood, meekness, and humility." Frederica Mathewes-Green, The Door interview, March/April 1995, p. 10-11.

20. John 18:36. Bob Briner says that "we are to be ambassadors of the One to whom we belong. It is important to remember that ambassadors do not meddle in the internal affairs of the country to which they are sent. They merely represent the interests and carry the messages of their homeland." (Deadly Detours: Seven Noble Causes that Keep Christians from Changing the World, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, p. 35.)

21. Christ's words in Matthew 6:1-4 make the pursuit of government less attractive as well. To some extent, calls for government activism often amount to a show of self-righteousness as opposed to working "quietly" behind the scenes, one-on-one. In Matthew 17:24-27, Christ claims an exemption from the temple tax-- since the king and his sons are usually exempted-- but decides to pay anyway "so that we may not offend."

22. See also: Ezra 6:10b, Jeremiah 29:7, I Thessalonians 4:11-12.

23. See also: Titus 3:1-2. For my attempt to find legitimate exceptions to this command, see: "The Ethics of Tax Evasion Within Biblical Christianity", in The Ethics of Tax Evasion, ed. R. McGee, Dumont Institute of Public Policy Research, 1998, p. 144-157.

24. "When Christ said, 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that God's', those words...gave to the civil power, under the protection of conscience, a sacredness it had never enjoyed, and bounds it had never acknowledged; and they were the repudiation of absolutism and the inauguration of freedom." (Lord Acton, "The history of freedom in antiquity", p. 29; quoted in K. DeYoung, Acton graduate student essay contest

winner, 2001.) Similarly, C. S. Lewis remarked that: “If individuals live only seventy years, then a state, or a nation, or a civilization, which may last for a thousand years, is more important than an individual. But if Christianity is true, then the individual is not only more important but incomparably more important, for his life is everlasting and the life of a state or a civilization, compared with his, is only a moment.” (Mere Christianity, New York: Macmillan, 1960, p. 73.) Finally, note that people were “amazed” at Christ’s specific teachings only three times: his teachings about the resurrection and no marriage in eternity (Matthew 22:33), the difficulty for the rich to get into heaven (Mark 10:24,26), and his Caesar/God comment (Luke 20:26). The first will always be amazing; interestingly, the second and third were amazing in their contemporary context but are taken as axiomatic today.

25. Acts 4:16-21, 5:28-29,33. Three vignettes in the book of Daniel (chapters 1, 3, and 6) also serve as excellent examples of appropriate responses to government. See also: Exodus 1, Joshua 2. Augustine (p. 113): “When it is considered how short is the span of human life, does it really matter to a man whose days are numbered what government he must obey, so long as he is not compelled to act against God or his conscience?”

26. There are two potential errors here: one can submit too little or too much to the State. This is analogous to the conditions under which one should submit (or not) to parents, employers, or a spouse.

27. Using some simplifying assumptions, John Cobin calculates that non-theocratic government policies were evil more than 90% of the time and more than 60% of theocratic government policies were evil (Bible and Government: Public Policy from a Christian Perspective, Greenville, SC: Alertness Books, 2003, p. 97-98, 106-111).

28. John MacArthur reproduces the classic prayers of this sort by Clement of Rome and Justin Martyr (Why Government Can’t Save You, p. 82-84). See also: Matthew 5:41’s call to go the extra mile.