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A BIBLICAL BASIS FOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT WITHIN A TRADITIONAL DISPENSATIONAL FRAMEWORK

by Thomas Ice

Traditional dispensationalism¹ has the reputation of lack of interest in social and political involvement. This may or may not be a fair perception. I think it has largely been true with some notable exceptions.² However, I do think that dispensational theory, whether developed and applied or not, is capable of producing a theology of social and political involvement that is consistent with the principles of dispensational theology. The goal of this paper is to layout a broad outline of just such a theology.

The biblical covenants provide a framework by which we can know how God wants us to behave in every area of life. Since the early covenants in Genesis are related to Adam and his descendants (i.e., all mankind), it makes sense that the jurisdiction of these covenants apply to all humanity. How so?

THE EDENIC COVENANT

The Edenic Covenant (Gen. 1:28-30; 2:15-17) provides the pre-Fall basis that God employs to establish His rule and relationship to mankind in this conditional covenant. The prohibition against eating the forbidden fruit was a one-time test given only to Adam (Gen. 2:15-17) and thus is not a ban that we can transgress today (see also Rom. 5:13-14). However, the Cultural Mandate (Gen. 1:26-28) was not just for Adam. It provides the basis for areas of individual human responsibility, social, political and

¹ When I use the term “dispensationalism” I am referring to “traditional dispensationalism.” I do not believe that recent developments like “progressive dispensationalism” are a valid form of dispensationalism, since they improperly commingle the dispensations (i.e., the current church age is a spiritual form of the Davidic Kingdom or Millennium). This matter, of course, has already been debated and is an issue for another day. Just want to spell out what I mean by dispensationalism.

² Some exceptions would include Jerry Falwell, Tim and Beverly LaHaye and Francis Schaeffer. Based upon a series of extensive lectures given by Schaeffer in the ‘60s on eschatology it is clear that if he would not have taken the label of dispensationalism I do not know where he would have differed.

economic duties, as well as accountability before God for all humanity down through subsequent history. It is through this covenant that God defines man's role for cultural and public activity in history. It is mankind's job description in shorthand.

DIVINE INSTITUTIONS

The divine institutions are conventions that function within the biblical covenants that relate to mankind's social life. I first learned about the biblical teaching relating to what some have called, divine institutions from a pastor named Charles Clough³ about 35 years ago. He says, "Divine institutions are real absolute structures built into man's social existence."⁴ "The term 'divine institution' has been used for centuries by Christians, particularly in Reformed circles, to describe the fixed, basic social forms," according to Clough.⁵ Divine institutions were created by God, thus Divine, but apply to all mankind from the time of Adam and Eve. Man's basic social structures did not just evolve over time but were part of God's creation.

The first divine institution is responsible dominion (Gen. 1:26–30; 2:15–17; Ps. 8:3–8), which is the area that an individual is responsible to God. Man was created to be God's vice regent over planet earth in order to manage it under God's authority. The fall resulted in a perversion of man's responsibility but it was never taken away.⁶ This means that each individual human being is responsible before God for creative labor, which is designed to glorify God. God designed it so that through the individual choices one may demonstrate in history a record of obedience or rebellion against their

³ Anyone interested in listening to the mp3 audio series by Charles Clough on "The Biblical Framework," it can download it at www.cclough.com.

⁴ Charles A. Clough, *Laying The Foundation*, revised (Lubbock: Lubbock Bible Church, 1977), p. 36. An updated version of this can be found in a pdf format on www.cclough.com.

⁵ Clough, *Laying*, p. 36, f.n. 36.

Creator. After the Fall, Clough notes: "Instead of peaceable, godly dominion over all the earth under God and His Word, man fights and claws his way to a counterfeit dominion built of his own works (cf. Jas 4:1–4)."⁷ Individual choice is seen as the area in which one either trusts Christ as his Savior or rejects Him. No one else can do it on behalf of an individual.

The second divine institution is marriage (Gen. 2:18–24). This institution is deduced from the original marriage of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2. It is within this realm that sexual relations are to be experienced and together the husband and wife are to fulfill the cultural mandate to rule over the creation. We see that the woman is called a "helper" who was brought by God to Adam who needed a helper corresponding to himself in order to help him in his calling to rule over nature. "Unlike animals, mankind's so-called sexual differentiation is not merely for procreation; it is also for dominion."⁸ "Later the extreme importance of the structure of marriage appears in the NT when Paul reveals that it typifies the union between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:22–33)."⁹ Clough makes the following helpful comment:

Mankind cannot express God's image except as both "male and female" together (Gen. 1:27). This is because God has certain characteristics that are "feminine" in nature (e.g., Matt. 23:37). Moreover, the woman's role as "helper" in Genesis 2:18 is not meant to be a demeaning, secondary one. The term used for "helper" elsewhere is used of God Himself (Exod. 18:4; Deut. 33:7). . . .

Undeniably, however, the Bible places emphasis upon the man as the one who receives his calling from God which then shapes his choice of wife. . . . Together in a division of labor man and wife separate from their own family, in contrast to an extended family, does a young man have to face full leadership responsibility directly under God.¹⁰

⁶ Charles A. Clough, *A Biblical Framework for Worship and Obedience in an Age of Global Deception*, Part II, p. 39. From the following internet address: <http://www.cclough.com/notes.php>

⁷ Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 60.

⁸ Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 40.

⁹ Clough, *Laying*, p. 37.

¹⁰ Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 40.

The third divine institution is built upon the first two and is that of family. “In the Bible it is the family, not the individual, that is the basic unit of society (property, for example, is titled under Mosaic Law to families).”¹¹ “Family exists for training of the next generation (cf. Exod. 20:12; Deut. 6:4-9; Eph. 6:1-4).”¹² Family is the institution that is responsible for continuing each family legacy by being responsible for education and wealth. Even if a family chooses to use surrogate teachers, the family is responsible for seeing that a child is properly educated. Clough tells us:

Family and marriage cannot be separated from dominion. Where dominion is perverted and the environment ruined, starvation and poverty follow. Where marriage is dishonored and where families are broken, society collapses. No amount of laws, programs, or “redefinitions” of marriage and family can save the day. God designed the divine institutions to provide dominion and prosperity.¹³

The Fall did not change any of the divine institutions, instead it corrupted man who misuses them. Clough explains:

When faced with the corruption in each of these social structures, fallen man responds in several ways. One way is to reinterpret the struggles with sin in terms of economics (Marx’s “class war”) or of race (white and black racists) or of psychology (Freud and others). Another cope-out is to abandon the institutions themselves as outdated, arbitrary social “conventions” that need “re-engineering”. All such responses, however, are costly failures to the

¹¹ Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 41.

¹² Clough, *Laying*, p. 37.

¹³ Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 41.

societies that try them. In the end, they reflect the pagan mindset that denies the responsibility of the fall and the abnormality of evil.¹⁴

POST FALL DIVINE INSTITUTIONS

At least two more divine institutions were established after the Fall of man into sin. Both were instituted after the Flood and were designed to restrain evil in a fallen world. The first three divine institutions are the positive or productive ones of society, while the last two are negative, designed to restrain evil in a fallen world.

The fourth divine institution is civil government whereby God transferred to man through the Noahic Covenant the responsibility to exercise kingdom authority in order to help restrain evil after the Flood (Gen. 9:5–6). Before the Flood man could not execute judgment upon evil as seen in the way in which God commanded man to deal with Cain’s murder of Abel (Gen. 4:9–15). This divine institution is based upon capital punishment (Gen. 9:5–6) and if for the purpose of restraining evil (Rom. 13:3–4). Lesser judicial authority is implied in the God-given command for civil institutions to exact a life for life. Even though capital punishment has grown distasteful to apostate Western culture, it is still the basis for God’s establishment of civil government.¹⁵

The fifth divine institution is tribal diversity, which was also established after the Flood in order to promote social stability in a fallen world (see Gen. 9:25–27 and compare with Gen. 10—11 and Deut. 32:8). Notice this is not racial diversity but tribal diversity. This divine institution does not involve race but tribes or families.

“Throughout the postdiluvian period,” explains Clough, “God preserved man’s social

¹⁴ Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 61.

¹⁵ See Clough, *Laying*, p. 83 and *A Biblical Framework*, pp. 97–98.

stability and health by playing off one group or tribe against another to maximize true progress and retard the influence of evil (cf. Acts 17:26–27)."¹⁶

Tribal diversity was implemented through the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9). Why did God want to separate mankind? Many believe that mankind should come together in unity. Genesis 11:6 explains why God confused human language as follows: "And the LORD said, 'Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them.'" Thus, the only reason why humanity wants to unite itself is in order to more effectively rebel against God, as seen in the Tower of Babel incident. This is why currently history is moving toward globalism as we move further from God and is why the goal of Antichrist in the tribulation is to forge together a one-world government set against the plan and purposes of God. The tribulation will end with God's direct intervention and judgment, as at the Flood. In the mean time, God slows down man's collective rebellion through civil government and tribal diversity.

The purpose for tribal diversity can be illustrated by differences between large boat hulls. Until about 100 years ago, all large sea going vessels had a single large hull. If a large enough hole developed in the hull then often the ship would sink as it filled up with water. Then ship builders started building multiple compartments in large ships with the belief that if there developed a hole in one compartment then the other compartments could keep the ship afloat. So it is with mankind! If one tribe became corrupt then God did not need to judge the whole world. He could use other peoples to judge that tribe without needing worldwide judgment. This is one way God manages the nations between the Flood and His second coming.

¹⁶ Clough, *Laying*, p. 84.

THE MOSAIC LAW AND THE CHURCH

Paul says that the Law of Moses has been set aside with the completed work of Christ. The Jews understood him to be “persuading the people to worship in ways contrary to the Law,” and that he was teaching “all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses” (Acts 18:13; 21:20-29). Though Paul’s accusers may have misunderstood him, the accusation surely is based on statements and actions of Paul that gave rise to such thinking, even as the declaration of the Jews against Jesus’ claim to deity was based on his words and actions that gave them reason to understand Him in that way. Paul teaches that the Mosaic Law has been done away in many passages (Rom. 6:14–15; 7:1–6; 10:4; 1 Cor. 3:7–11; 9:19–23; Gal. 2:19—3:5; 4:1–7; 5:18; Eph. 2:14–22). Further, the Law of Moses and the Old Testament itself says that the Law was given only to the nation of Israel.¹⁷

The New Testament does not recommend the death penalty for things that the Old Testament states should get the ultimate sanction. The law of Moses teaches that “if a man sleeps with his father’s wife . . . the man and the woman must be put to death” (Lev. 20:11). In 1 Corinthians 5 this sin occurred but Paul’s punishment is to turn the man over to Satan (5:5) by expulsion from the church (5:7, 13). He even says judgment of those outside the church is not the church’s business (5:12). If the sinner of 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 is the same person, then the church was ultimately supposed to restore him to fellowship. Such would have been impossible had the Mosaic penalty been carried out.

¹⁷ See Exod. 34:27; 20:4; Deut. 4:1, 6–8, 13, 20, 34, 37, 44; 7:6–8; 10:12–15; 26:16–19; 29:1–2; 1 Kings 8:9; Psalm 147:19–20.

Deuteronomy 18:20 says if a prophet “presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say . . . [he] must be put to death.” However, in the New Testament Hymenaeus and Philetus “wandered away from the truth,” saying “that the resurrection has already taken place” and so destroying the “faith of some” (2 Tim. 2:17f), and yet Paul does not urge their death. Rather he wishes that they will come to their senses and escape the trap of the devil (2 Tim. 2:24-26). There are other New Testament passages that teach that the Mosaic Law ended with the coming of Christ (c.f. Heb. 8:6—7, 13; 10:9). Further,

The Christian is to love the law of God. Grace does not free the believer from obedience to the will of God. However, Christians are not under the expression of the law as it was given to Israel. Instead, we may use the Mosaic legislation as examples of how we may respond individually and corporately; we may gain wisdom from it. Christians are, however, to obey the will of God as it is expressed in the New Testament—the law of Christ—and the law revealed in the Adamic and Noahic covenants as expressed through the divine institutions.

When it comes to developing wisdom in the various areas of life, we do have to look to the law for insight in these areas. The believer is not to adopt viewpoints in any area of life that are the product of the world system. He is to attempt to develop and hold to a Biblical view of government, economics, family, education, and so on. We are children of the light and we are to shine in the current darkness. However, since it is not the plan or will of God for the Kingdom of God to take over in this age, it means that we are like Daniel—standing for Biblical standards, while waiting for God's intervention in history to be realized. This could be called a "wisdom approach", as opposed to a "law approach". The Biblical model is Proverbs. As one studies the book of Proverbs, it does not take long before it becomes apparent that the wisdom of

Proverbs is the product of Solomon meditating upon the law of Moses. He then uses the format of wisdom in which to pass this on to his son and to the next generation.

Wisdom differs from law in that, law is the legal stipulations with-in the covenant which regulate and can be enforced by civil penalties. Law can govern any area of life, such as civil, family, personal, and religious institutions. On the other hand, wisdom is advice with no legal penalties attached. Wisdom tells the naive "the end of a matter," so that the pitfalls of life may be avoided. Wisdom gives an appeal to the student to follow after her because it is right and yields certain practical benefits. Wisdom also, applies to every area of life.

Adultery is treated in similar yet different ways in the law and wisdom literature. In the law it says, Thou shalt not... (Deut. 5:18) and in certain situations it carries the death penalty (Deut. 22:22). It gives insight into why you should not commit adultery and even appeals to the student to follow the way of wisdom (Prov. 7:6-23), but does not legislate civil penalties. Wisdom says that if a wise person will walk in her way, certain benefits will follow. No wonder Paul told Timothy "that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully" (1 Tim. 1:8). In the Church Age, a Wisdom approach to the Mosaic Law is a good and lawful use of the law.

Deuteronomy 4:6-8 appeals to a wisdom and understanding which was given exclusively to Israel, which the other nations would observe. "So keep and do them, for that is *your wisdom* and *your understanding* in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a *wise* and *understanding* people. For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the Lord our God whenever we call on Him? Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as *righteous* as this whole law which I am setting before you today?" Even though given to Israel, their wisdom is evident to outsiders. Those who would be impressed would

likely imitate this wisdom. This has certainly been the approach taken by many of the Gentile nations during the current Church Age when Christians have been able to exert influence.

For a Christian to function in one of these areas, he would want to apply specific Old Testament laws meant for Israel, in order to develop a wise approach in those areas. But it is wisdom and not law. It is true that Israel's law is not binding on the nations. The Noahic covenant is. However, for the believer made new, he will want to be mature and apply the wisdom that he learned under his childhood (the law). There is a big difference between saying that something is law today and that it is wisdom. Often the net affect will be the same, since the regenerate believer will want to apply the wisdom of God's law. But the fact remains that the Covenant and the laws that are attached to the Mosaic Covenant were made with Israel and no one else.

God's purpose for the Church age is to call out from among the nations a people for His name, to be His Son's bride. The purpose for this age is different than it was in the previous Dispensation. Therefore, while there is continuity between the ages, there is also discontinuity. God's purpose is not Christianization of the world, but evangelization. The Church is the instrument of calling the peoples of the world to repent and believe the Gospel. Those who respond are to be built up by this precious Word of God that He has given to His Church. We are involved in tireless activity while our Master has gone on a long journey; we are eagerly waiting for His Son to come from heaven and deliver us from the wrath to come.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN THE CHURCH AGE

God sovereignly appoints and removes rulers, according to the Bible. Clearly even pre-Mosaic and post-Mosaic rulers all serve by the permission and will of God, including Pharaoh, Herod, Pilate, Nebuchadnezzar, and Cyrus.

The New Testament view teaches that Rulers, as God's appointees, are not to be resisted. Authority belongs to God and the Noahic Covenant indicates that judicial authority has been given to men (cf. Rom. 13:2-5). Whenever someone rebels against those authorized by God to express His authority then this is rebellion against God.

Since rulers are servants of God, rulers are God's vice-regents, avengers of His wrath. Clearly Israel's rulers had this function under the Sinaitic covenant. Nations have no such function under the Sinaitic Covenant. Paul in Romans 13:1-2 states that rulers have this function but he never ties it into the Law of Moses. The New Testament tells us that the civil magistrate must deter evil but honor the good (Rom. 13:3). Again, this is a duty included in the Noahic Covenant.

The nations have their mandate from the Abrahamic and Noahic Covenants. Since this is true, God judges the nations based upon their adherence to their commitment to the covenant with Noah. The judicial authority of the civil magistrate to enforce God's law is legitimate but it is not the specific expression of the law of God's in the particulars that it was given to Israel. Certainly many of the practical expressions of law God gave to Israel, and the particular penalties, may be used as a model for establishing civil laws for society but there is no requirement to do so and the failure not to do so, other than the will of God in the conscience and given through Noah, will not bring the wrath of God.

CONCLUSION

We see from this theological approach to government and society that it first of all consistent with the theological principles of dispensationalism. Thus, social and political responsibility is individual, except for the care of widows by the church (1 Tim. 5). This understanding produces a conservative view of government and looks to individual responsibility and the family as the productive institutions in a society. During the current church age, an individual believer would function socially within the framework of the divine institutions while taking into account whatever commands are given him as a member of the church, the Body of Christ.