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Biblical Principles of Government

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BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES *of* **GOVERNMENT**

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The following article seeks to provide an overview of the key ideas and themes of Scripture which relate to the realm of government. The safest way to find Biblical principles is to avoid using just one verse here and there which “seems” to fit, and instead to look for general principles which are evident throughout Scripture and to apply those principles accordingly. The discussion below illuminates major Biblical themes and then provides points of application. These general themes are:

- God is the source of all truth, power, and authority
- Man is sinful
- Jesus Christ is the only Means of ultimate salvation
- Faith in Christ cannot be coerced
- Loving accountability in Christ

The above are general principles of Scripture—the major ideas that provide the basis for numerous Church sermons every Sunday. Usually, these principles are discussed in ways such that churchgoers can apply them to their own lives personally, but they also have very real and important application to the realm of government and public policy. As you read the information below, be on the lookout for the following key government/policy applications:

- Limited government
- Inalienable rights
- Natural law
- Institutional separation of Church and State
- Covenant (federalism)
- Sin/Crime distinction

GOD IS THE SOURCE OF ALL TRUTH, POWER, & AUTHORITY.

Government must always act within the authority prescribed to it by God. God’s Law is the source of man-made law. Emerging from the tradition of English common law and the Western Legal Tradition in general is the notion of “natural law”; that is, an inherent standard of right reason. Natural law is used to explain the presence of this standard of right and wrong. It most definitely comes from a biblical perspective as legal theorists like William Blackstone explained that it co-existed with, but was subservient to, God’s revealed law, that is, Scripture. Further, it was used in part to justify the existence of inalienable rights.

GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE: because government is not the ultimate source of authority, it must be limited in nature.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

- The main takeaway here is that justice does not originate from man-made law. Some argue that morals should change based upon an evolving and consensual understanding of what is right and wrong.
- Adhering to ancient, fixed standards of right and wrong, the argument goes, actually furthers repression of self-expression and freedom, and by default, tyranny. However, this

perspective provides no moral basis for signifying human beings as uniquely eligible for inalienable rights which cannot be infringed upon by the State or by society.

- If the State has the final say, than justice is malleable and can and will fall prey to those who have the most power. A sense of natural law, then, is a bulwark against such injustices because it presupposes God's authority and the State as subservient to that.

MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE

We are made in God's image and thus are spiritual beings, designed to live under God's authority. By nature of being made in God's image, we possess **inalienable rights**. Inalienable rights are defined as those rights that are inherent to our personhood. They cannot be taken away, nor can they be given away. Inalienable rights are defined as life, liberty, and property. These things are supported in Scripture by virtue of being made in God's image and by various commandments from the Old Testament (Genesis 1:26, 9:6, the Ten Commandments) as well as the most basic commandment affirmed in both the Old and New Testaments to love God and love others.

- **GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE:** Government exists first and foremost to protect our inalienable rights and ensure justice. Citizens are required to participate in the political process as a means of limiting tyranny.
- **CRIMINAL JUSTICE IMPLICATIONS:** criminal and police investigations must protect inalienable rights. People must be assumed innocent until proven guilty, and undo force must be avoided in all processes.
- **POLICY IMPLICATIONS:** any policies which violate the inalienable rights of human beings are unjust and should be opposed.

MAN IS SINFUL

We are also sinful because we have rejected God's perfect ways. Sin is not just about actions that we take, but also attitudes of the heart. Further, the Bible describes sin as an active, confounding force that binds us in spiritual blindness and oppression. Injustice in the world derives from the presence of sin in our lives. Thus, at their core, the world's problems need the saving touch of Jesus Christ first and foremost. This intervention does not remove the need for government intervention.

GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE: Because of the presence of sin, government itself must be limited. Rule by consent, separation of powers, checks and balances, use of a Constitution, and federalism are all means to limit the sinfulness of would be rulers.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

- No policy issue should ignore the spiritual component of any problem. Any rejection of the spiritual component of problems, particularly those involving human behavior and matters of the heart, will lead to failed policy interventions. Government cannot remove evil; only Christ can. Thus, government, at best, can only restrain evil through the passage and enforcement of laws and regulations. But the more laws and regulations are created, the less

freedom and flexibility exists for citizens, and the more likely it is that rulers will seek to consolidate power through new rules, whether by executive, legislative, or judicial fiat.

- Government interventions in society, whether they be economic, domestic, or educational, will have limited success because leaders and citizens alike are irrational due to the power of sin. Even the most logical policy plans will fail because even our capacity for rational thought is limited due to sin. Economic and domestic solutions which limit government interventions are more apt to be successful simply because they allow for greater involvement of more people with more freedom. Top-down, hierarchical solutions, no matter how good the original intentions of the policy formulators, are apt to fail because political actors, by nature of being sinful and human, will tend to use policy initiatives to preserve their own political power.

JESUS CHRIST IS THE ONLY MEANS OF ULTIMATE SALVATION

Jesus Christ, as fully God and fully man, died on the cross for our sins. His sacrifice was the perfect legal remedy for the problem of sin. All who put their hope in Christ by faith alone will be saved. But faith must be arrived at freely. It cannot be coerced. All those who are saved by grace in Christ will be also sanctified by grace in Christ.

GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE: Since faith is something that must not be coerced, Government should not enforce religion on others or interfere with matters of conscience.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

- Domestic policies dealing with issues like poverty are also problematic if and when they ignore the spiritual components of problems like poverty, such as selfishness, laziness, and the power and destruction of addictive behaviors.
- It is vital, therefore, the Church have an active and engaged role in such issues. Where the Church abdicates, the State will overstep. Where the State oversteps, tyranny will increase.

FAITH IN CHRIST CANNOT BE COERCED

Christ was not interested in using political or military power to enforce his kingdom. What results from the building of Christ's kingdom is not a military or political kingdom but the Church. The Church is redeemed through the power of Christ, in conjunction with the Holy Spirit and God's Word. Followers of Christ are knit together into the body of Christ, and we are called to love and care for one another, and to be accountable to one another. This is expressed through the Biblical idea of covenant, which involves mutual care and accountability, steadfast love, and cooperation. Further, the Holy Spirit works in the Body of Christ to sanctify its members, and the body of Christ, that is, the Church, is used to preach the Gospel to the world, to care for the poor, and to fight injustice.

GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE:

- **Government is not under Mosaic Law but must uphold general principles from Scripture:** Christians may wonder if we are still under Mosaic Law as found in the Old Testament. Specifically, in the Old Testament books of Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, God introduces many rules and laws to the people of Israel. Christians might wonder if these laws are still relevant today. These laws were divided into moral law (specifically the Ten Commandments), ceremonial law (all of the rules associated with the temple, sacrifices, etc.) and judicial law (the punishments for those who disobeyed the rules). It can be confusing to know whether any of these laws are still relevant today. First, we know that Jesus Christ, by being the ultimate sacrifice for our sins, replaced any need for a temple or further sacrifices (Hebrews 9), so the ceremonial law has been removed. Secondly, we know that he took the punishment for our sins, so the judicial component of Mosaic Law is no longer relevant. Finally, he promised to write the moral law in our hearts, which is to say that the spirit and essence of the Mosaic Law is still relevant today, but it is upheld in different ways.
- God works through the Church and with the power of the Holy Spirit and His Word (the Bible) to change lives. Government cannot do this. Thus, the institutions of Church and State are separate as a means of protecting freedom of conscience and liberty.
- The covenantal nature of Scripture further suggests that power should be shared among various “spheres” of authority throughout society: including: a) the individual, b) the family, c) the church, d) state and local communities, e) businesses, f) non-profits, and of course, g) the national government.
- Related to the Biblical idea of covenant is the political term *federalism*. Federalism describes the process and structure by which our national government shares power with the State governments. The reason we refer to our national government as our “federal” government is because it shares power with the State governments and recognizes the States as sovereign entities rather than just “administrative” offices of the national government. As you can see, the notion of sharing power with the States and respecting the autonomy of the State governments is in keeping with the Biblical idea of covenant which seeks to empower and respect all involved in the covenant. In fact, in Scripture, the Latin word for covenant is *fedis* and there is a rich history of “federal theology” as part of the Protestant Reformation, which certainly had an impact on the early American colonial tradition. Numerous scholars have studied the impact of federal theology on the social and political structures in early American life. City, state, and ultimately national government structures and constitutions were impacted by this idea of covenant. We see federalism specifically honored in 10th Amendment.
- All of these spheres are accountable to one another and must not transgress the other domains of authority. This is yet another reason that the institutions of Church and State must be separate.
- Further, these various spheres need one another. The State cannot remedy spiritual concerns, just as the Church, for instance, cannot deal with injustices related to the violation of inalienable rights.
- The **Sin/Crime** distinction helps us understand the different roles of Church and State:

All crimes are sins, but not all sins are crimes.

The State prosecutes and tries to prevent crimes. Crimes are only those sins that essentially equate to a violation of inalienable rights, whether a person's one inalienable rights (suicide, addictive/destructive behaviors, etc.) or the inalienable rights of others.

If we understand that you and I may only use physical force to protect ourselves and others in extreme, life threatening circumstances, we understand that the same is true of the State as well—it can only use its God-given authority to prevent crimes which amount to violations of inalienable rights.

Some may wonder whether forgiveness in Christ removes the role of the State in punishing crime. But again, the role of the State is different from how the Church serves society. The New Testament (Covenant) is clear that government still has a role in punishing crime. Even Genesis 9:6, which existed well before Mosaic Law (and is therefore not bound by it) states that government must kill murderers (capital punishment).

Meanwhile, the Church, in participation with the power of God's Word and Spirit, seek to address other types of sin which do not equate to crime. Matters of conscience and personal obedience to the Lord, therefore, cannot be coerced with political or physical power.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

- Education policies in particular are prone to an improper fusion of Church and State because education ultimately involves matters of the heart and therefore matters of conscience.
- For a policy intervention to be successful, it is best to include a holistic, multi-sphered solution to the problem, so that churches, families, businesses, non-profits, local and state communities, etc. and work together.
- The State cannot be viewed as the only solution to any problem such as crime. Punishing criminals restrains evil; it does not remove it.

LOVING ACCOUNTABILITY IN CHRIST

Part of accountability in the Church is receiving loving reproof and correction. Brothers who consistently reject Biblical admonition and truth must be removed from fellowship, lest they lead others astray. This removal from fellowship is only done after many attempts at thoughtful engagement and efforts help the person see the error of their way. Then and only then does breaking of fellowship occur.

GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE:

- Likewise, rulers are accountable to the truths of God's Word and to the people.
- A well-designed system of government will have built-in accountability measures that allow the people to intervene in a non-violent way should rulers, laws, agencies, etc. become tyrannical. This again speaks to the importance of checks-and-balances, rule by consent, use of a Constitution, etc., etc.
- If rulers do not submit to these things they must be removed from office. There may be times, however, when this is not possible because the system of government itself is so

corrupt that no minor interventions will suffice. "Breaking of fellowship" in the political context may look like resistance, peaceful rebellion, martyrdom, or war.