

Week 5 - A Theology Of Civil Government

Opening Prayer

Session Review

Week One:

The priority of the Gospel to shape us, our views, and our attitudes.

Week Two:

Christian Worldview: Viewing the World in Light of God's Self Revelation

Week Three:

Competing Worldviews: Viewing the World While At War with Reality

Week Four:

Church and State: Upstream Theology Considerations

Church & State In History

The State to Exclude Religion

Communist Dictatorships

Modern pluralistic America

The State to Compel Religion:

Medieval European Roman Catholicism

Modern Islamic theocracies

American postmodern pluralism.

What do you say to this conundrum?

The State

Government / Civil Government

Is it good or evil?

Governments are God's servants, Rom. 13:1–7

They also can become imposters, because they rage and take their stands against God and his Messiah (Ps. 2:1–3).

So, what makes a good government good? A good government provides a basic protective justice for all its citizens, including God's people, whether it recognizes them as God's people or not. That means Christians should care about good government both for their neighbor's sake and for the church's sake.

Government is even more difficult because we must deal with the church-world relationship, and Christians disagree about the nature of that relationship. Consider three models. Someone could say that Christians . . .

(1) should seek to enforce Christianity through the government;

(2) should seek to enforce aspects of Christianity through the government, namely, a number of its moral standards;

(3) should not seek to enforce Christianity through the government at all, but should express their faith entirely in the private sphere.

I assume that options (1) and (3), as stated here, don't sit quite right with anyone.

Yet people do lean toward one or the other.

The (1)-leaning people feel the weight of God's Lordship and judgment over all things..

The (3)-leaning recognizes that we cannot force our faith on people, and they point to Jesus's instructions about rendering to Caesar what's Caesar's and God what's God's (Matt. 22:21).

Still, most of us, including myself, don't feel like we can move all the way to position (1) or position (3), but put ourselves somewhere in the middle.

Through the centuries, Christians in this middle lane have tried different ways to explain why we can open our Bibles and seek to impose with the sword a verse like "You shall not murder" on unbelievers but not one like "Jesus is Lord."

Where would you place yourself on the spectrum between (1) and (3)?

I will argue for position (2) as related to governmental authority.

This means that, contrary to position (1), I believe we should affirm the separation of church and state, or at least a version of it. Yet contrary to position (3), I don't believe we should affirm the separation of religion and politics.

That prospect, as I have already addressed, is impossible.

The separation of Church and State, as mentioned last week, is absolutely necessary. They have separate missions and separate jurisdictions.

The Church is given the Keys to the Kingdom.

The State is given the sword to enable the Church to pursue its mandate.

However, the separation of State and Religion is absolutely impossible.

Every person, every thought, every action assumes a religious belief to the exclusion of conflicting religious beliefs.

Neutrality is a myth.

The State's Authority

Babysitter analogy

Perhaps an analogy would help for filling out the illustration for position (2) above.

You might say that the Bible approaches governments like parents do a babysitter. "You're not responsible to teach our kids to love and obey us," they instruct the sitter. "You just need to keep them fed and safe, and prevent them from fighting." The babysitter is entirely "under" the parents, but the sitter's jurisdiction is limited. The babysitter knows the parents' return is imminent and will seek to fulfill the parent's will. Still, the babysitter has been given a modest job: "Your job isn't to teach the kids to love us or worship God. Just help them play well together and go to bed on time." Likewise, a good government will fear and acknowledge God. It knows a day is coming when "the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free" will experience God's judgment for how they did their jobs (Rev. 6:15). Still, God has given the government a comparatively modest job.

With modest authority

What is that authority?

In the first instance, governmental authority is a necessary entailment of the dominion mandate that God gave to Adam and Eve (“be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it”).

It’s a condition of expanding our presence on the planet with other people, so that we might live together in an orderly, predictable, and cooperative fashion.

Yet governmental authority after the fall must also deal with sinful agents and the scarcity of resources.

That means governmental authority must recognize that God does indeed command all human beings to fill the earth and subdue it, but also that these humans are now murdering each other (Gen. 4:8), stealing one another’s provisions (Gen. 14:11), lying to their husbands and fathers (Gen. 27:13, 19), raping one another’s daughters, and slaughtering entire cities in retaliation (Gen. 34).

For this reason, God introduces the authority to use coercive force. Nothing in the original dominion mandate says that one human being has the right to arbitrarily use force over another human being.

After all, every human shares equally in creation in our God-assigned authority.

Therefore, God must specially authorize the use of coercive force, which brings us to what we might call the “Great Commission” text for governmental authority on this side of the fall: Genesis 9:5–6. Just like Matthew 28 does for churches, Genesis 9:5–6 doesn’t spell out everything a government will need to do, but it lays down a few basic constitutional principles.

Let’s start with this phrase:

“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.”

You may not have spent a lot of time meditating on that verse, but it’s worth pulling up a chair and staring at it for a moment. It packs quite a punch.

Coercion

First, it authorizes the use of coercive force in order to prosecute the taking of life. By implication it also authorizes a government to prevent the unjust taking of life. For instance, I’d say it gives a government moral permission to say, “Here’s the speed limit,” or “Commercial aircraft must meet these safety codes” (see Deut. 22:8), or even “Pay taxes so that we can build an army for our nation’s protection” (see Luke 3:13; Rom. 13:7).

It is at this point where the illustration from the first session is relevant.

(SLIDE)

Straight line application - murder

Wisdom based application - applying relevant principles in Deuteronomy, Luke and Romans. This is the point where humility is needed in the conversation.

Due Process

Second, this verse establishes a principle of due process: parity. The punishment must fit the crime. It's life for life.

Keep in mind that, in the ancient world, this principle typically served to limit the otherwise unconstrained demands for vengeance. Think again of Jacob's sons massacring a city in retaliation for the rape of their sister Dinah (Gen. 34).

The affirmation of parity also implies that every governmental action requires a just measurement.

"A just balance and scales are the Lord's; all the weights in the bag are his work. It is an abomination to kings to do evil, for the throne is established by righteousness"
Proverbs 16:10–12

Practically, for instance, a government must not bribe or overtax its citizens for selfish gain (see Prov. 29:4 ESV mg.).

Any tax requires a clear and just gauge that accords with government's basic life-protecting purposes.

All In God's Image

Third, Genesis 9:6 affirms the value of every human life as made in God's image and therefore equally valuable. People of every color and creed, men and women, deserve to be treated as God-imagers and possessors of a basic political equality. Jim Crow laws that read "separate, but equal," pushing blacks to different drinking fountains, are unjust.

Applies To All

Fourth, the verse subjects every human to its requirements, including governments themselves. Look again at the first word of verse 6: "whoever" wrongly sheds blood. The verse becomes a boomerang whenever governments use their authority unjustly. It indicts the murderous dictator and the racist town sheriff alike. No government can claim to be "above" its reach. It keeps governments and citizens alike accountable.

Crimes Against Man, Not God

Fifth, this verse possesses a theological basis—"for God made man in his own image"—but it doesn't authorize us to enforce that basis.

The trigger for action is harm to humans—"blood"—not harm to God.

After all, how do you measure or establish parity for an offense against God, to say nothing of the fact that we cannot harm him.

As such, the verse doesn't authorize us to prosecute crimes against God, like blasphemy or idolatry, if there is no quantifiable harm done to a human person. It leaves open a space for religious freedom, and that space is anything outside of the government's jurisdiction. On the flip side, however, the verse doesn't allow someone to claim "freedom of religion!" if their religion causes actual harm, like a Christian Scientist who wants to deny medical care to a child whose life is medically threatened.

State Authority & Justice

Clearly, governmental authority is a coercive authority, and it's an authority of command, as defined in chapter 11. But it is also a divinely ordained means of justice. All people are made in God's image and therefore deserve righteous treatment. Government serves the ends of justice by protecting these God-imagers.

"By justice a king builds up the land,"
Proverbs 29:4.

King David's throne, therefore, existed for the sake of upholding justice:

"So David reigned over all Israel. And David administered justice and equity [righteousness] to all his people" (2 Sam. 8:15).

Biblical justice is making judgments in accordance with God's standards of righteousness. Justice depends on a judgment, but that judgment needs a standard, a ruler or scale by which to measure the judgment.

To translate this into an American setting, we can say that all three branches of government should do justice—render righteous judgments—each in its own way.

The legislator should pass just laws.

The executive branch should enforce just laws in a just way.

And judges should uphold just laws and overturn unjust ones.

In each case, their work of justice should not be defined by some other god's version of righteousness, but by God's definition of righteousness.

Many Westerners assume otherwise.

Our nations are pluralistic, we reason. People believe in many different gods, from the big-G Gods of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or Mormonism, to the little-g neo-pagan gods of sex, body worship, consumption, and identity politics.

Therefore, Christians who lean toward position (3) say we need to create a public square and establish rules of justice that are neutral between people's competing gods. And we can do that by defining justice as "protecting people's rights."

That solution to societal pluralism is not entirely wrong.

Remember that underlying beliefs are always upstream of our understanding of what justice is . The trouble is, it's a society's reigning gods that will define which rights are right.

Shall we affirm the "right" to end the life of someone if they do not fit an arbitrary definition of personhood?

The "right" to same-sex marriage?

The "right" of children to define their own gender apart from parental intervention?

It's true that justice entails protecting people's rights. I'd agree with those who argue that the fact that we are created in God's image is the foundation for human rights.

Returning to our meditation on Genesis 9:5–6, we might say that it grants us the right to life, the right to be treated by our government with equal dignity, the right to worship God free from coercion, the right to insist on a fair trial and due process, even the right to all the liberties requisite for fulfilling the dominion mandate.

Source of Rights

Still, we possess these rights not because they are inherent in us apart from God, but because God says they are right. Rights are right only when and where God says they're right. Right is the root of justice, rights are the fruit. Pay attention to the "s." And the government's job begins with what's right (see Rom. 13:3–4; 1 Pet. 2:14).

Group (3) and others will quickly reply, "But whose definition of "right" shall we legislate? Which God or god's?"

They ask the question as if anyone has ever abandoned his god when stepping into the public square.

In fact, no one ever does or can.

We all argue on behalf of our God or gods in the public square and try to win a majority of the votes.

Everyone.

It's impossible to do otherwise.

In the ballot box or on the Senate floor, you fight for what you most value and worship.

Why State Authority?

Why does God give authority to the government?

We've already considered the first two reasons the Bible provides: to protect life and to secure the conditions of the dominion mandate and human flourishing.

A government does these two things by administering justice.

God's ultimate purpose for government is not merely to keep people alive but to keep them alive so that they might know God. Genesis 9 comes before Genesis 12 and the call of Abraham for a reason. Government provides a platform on which God's redemptive drama can play out.

Common grace sets the stage for special grace, like teaching people to read so that they can read the Bible.

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,

Acts 17:26–27

Governments don't bring us to God, but they free us up to seek him.

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

1 Timothy 2:1-4

We want governments that clear the ground for us to live such lives, lives where we can live out the full range of godliness that God intends.

Yet is that all there is to say?

No. Paul then tells us why we should pray for governments to do this: "This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth".

The two steps in these verses are interesting.

Step one: don't pray that governments would work to make disciples but that they would work for peace and safety.

Step two: realize that this is important because God wants people to be saved, which apparently is work that belongs to the institution that the rest of 1 Timothy is about: the church.

The government's job is to clear the path, smooth the road, set the stage, build a platform. A clear path and smooth road pleases God and should please us—for salvation's sake.

In short, we don't want a government that thinks it can offer redemption, but one that views its works as setting the stage for redemption.

Limits On State Authority

If a government's job is not to make disciples but to set the stage for disciple making, we need to think about its limits, as well as whether models (1), (2), or (3) from the beginning of this chapter are best. What are the limits of a civil government's authority?

The State Is Not God

The first and most crucial limit is, no government should regard itself as God. When the individual officers comprising the government don't acknowledge God, they will either worship another God or regard themselves as God. Members of group (3), insofar as they are tempted to believe governments can remain neutral between the gods, may need to be reminded of this point. Every prince and member of parliament, voter and judge, should acknowledge God and recognize that he or she is under God:

Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.
Serve the Lord with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.
Kiss the Son,
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled. (Ps. 2:10–12; see also Ps. 82:7)

Human Nature & The State Limitation

“If Men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and the next place, oblige it to control itself.”
James Madison

Madison realized that people needed governance due to their sinful human nature. The paradox was that those in government were also sinful and in need of restraint.

Lord Acton famously observed that, “Power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The more power placed in the hands of an individual, ruling elite, or large government, the greater the danger of this kind of corruption.

This should not surprise believers. They should expect this corruption, given our present sinful condition.

The State Must Be Limited

By Rule of Law

A limited government administered according to the rule of law, the rulers use power following established principles and procedures based on a constitution. By contrast, when the rulers wield power capriciously, there is rule by the unbridled will of individuals without regard for established law. The constitution can limit the government by enumerating or listing its powers. The government may not assume powers that are not listed or granted to it.

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

Roman 13:1

Ex. 18:24-27, Dt. 17:20, Isa. 8:19-20, Mat. 5:17-18

By A Separation of Powers

The legislative, executive, and judicial powers of government can be separated. Different individuals and agencies in the government have responsibility for different functions and are granted constitutional authority to check and balance the exercise of power by others in order to prevent any person or group from using its power abusively or despotically. An independent judiciary that can declare null and void an act of the government it deems contrary to the constitution is an especially important means to prevent illegal use of power by any government official. The legislature can use its powers of investigation and oversight to prevent excessive or corrupt actions by executive officials and agencies.

"For the LORD is our judge (Supreme Court), the LORD is our lawgiver (Congress), the LORD is our king (Presidency); He will save us."

Isaiah 33:22

It is said that this verse inspired James Madison to separate the powers while attending the Constitutional Convention of 1787.

By Check and Balances

How each branch of government provides checks and balances. The ability of each branch to respond to the actions of the other branches is the system of checks and balances. Each branch of government can change acts of the other branches: The president can veto legislation created by Congress.

Concerning the separation of powers, Jonathan Burnside argues that Deuteronomy 16:18–18:22 sets out a system of separation of powers and checks and balances between four kinds of authorities: judges, the king, priests, and prophets.

By Decentralization

Power can be decentralized throughout the society by some kind of federal system that enables the sharing of powers by national and local units of government.

By Representative Government

The power of government can be limited by holding representatives accountable to them through periodic elections, which are conducted freely, fairly, and competitively according to provisions of the constitution.

Compare the above principles for a Constitutional Republic to a modern idol: democracy. In its purest form democracy is rule by majority. Mob rule.

Conclusion

Our current political environment subverts the above in favor of granting more and more power for select people. Our of love for neighbor we need to speak out on this matter.

The Bible reveals directly and indirectly an understanding to what government both is and what it ought to be.

But our political environment is from this. Does this discussion really matter?

“But what might it look like for the church's politics if we became convinced-really convinced-both that we will have trouble in this world and that Jesus has overcome this world, as he promised? Might we present a strange and winsome confidence that is not desperate to win the culture wars but is also tenderly and courageously committed to the good of others?”

How the Nations Rage: Rethinking Faith and Politics in a Divided Age

Jonathan Leeman