

BEYOND POLITICS

Thinking Biblically about Government



S H A U N L E W I S



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Cover art: *The Acropolis at Athens* by Leo von Klenze, 1846.



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CHAPTER TWO

THINKING BIBLICALLY ABOUT GOVERNMENT

“When the President does it, that means that it is not illegal.”¹

Really, President Nixon? I think King George might have agreed, but that’s not good. America is a nation of law, a nation where laws are supposed to be applied to everyone equally. At least, that was the idea.

Watergate was a turning point in American history. All wasn’t well prior to the 70s, but trust in American government significantly eroded at this time, and the erosion continues. Honestly, how many Americans trust Congress to handle a vast web of surveillance programs? Not too many. According to Gallup, trust in our political leaders has plummeted by 33% in the last twelve years alone.²

Sadly, some among us have grown so tired and distrustful of the state they believe we’d be better off without it. One political advocate said, “I don’t want to abolish government. I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub.”³

After drowning the government, you could stop paying taxes. You could also stop drinking tap water, using fiat currency, driving your car, or feeling safe at home. Apart from this institution, who would finance a water treatment plant? And if you found someone, who would ensure the water is actually treated?

Beyond this, who would finance law enforcement? Who would determine the laws to be enforced? Who would maintain the roads and bridges we take for granted? Who would maintain the electrical grid? On and on we could go...

Government is a fallen institution that does nothing perfectly, but ours isn't a total failure. If you look back a century ago, Upton Sinclair published *The Jungle*, which exposed the meat-packing industry. So driven by profit margins, this industry hadn't any concern for safety. Workers had been maimed by the machines, plants were deplorable, and train cars were filthy. What did Congress do? Investigate and pass The Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.

Was it a perfect response? Probably not, but it's one case where our government saw a moral problem and responded rightly. No, the Act didn't eradicate greed or change a single American heart, but it did uphold and enforce a moral standard. It did what God would have government do.

The Lord created government to provide an order pleasing to Him, to be a blessing to man and to bring glory to Him throughout the earth. No government lives up to this high calling. Each tends to overstep its sphere of authority, meddle, and dishonor God in countless ways—our government is no exception. However, when I compare ours to the collapse of Zimbabwe or the oppression of North Korea, what we have in America is a blessing in many ways. I'm often thankful to live in this land.

I wrote this section on government as a result of conversations with Christians over the last ten years. Anger at the present state of our nation and fears about the future have been common responses. One step towards addressing this is to take a closer look at the Bible. What

does God say about the institution of government?

My hope is that by distilling a biblical view of the state, you would view it in ways more pleasing to God. Ultimately, your life and mine are in the hands of our good and gracious King. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

GOVERNMENT EXISTS TO PROVIDE ORDER

Let's go back to the very first government, Eden. Adam enjoyed unhindered fellowship with God. The Lord walked upon the earth, the animals obeyed Adam's voice, and work wasn't a grind. Eden was without a Constitution, and law enforcement wasn't necessary. What we find is a simple order: God → Man → Animals.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth"
— Genesis 1:26.

The only civil law in Eden was a prohibition against eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:17). One simple law, and man broke it.

For breaking God's law, Adam was banished from Eden. As he left with Eve, they stepped into a world devastated by sin (Gen 3). The world changed, the animals changed, and even man himself changed. Man, the image of God, made a ruin of himself. He could no longer rightly reflect or represent the Lord. Worse, he didn't much care.

But it was only one act!

Yes, it was only one act, but one that forever changed the world. The mind of man became futile in the eyes of God. The heart of man became dark with evil desires, and his spirit died (Eph 4:18-19; Col 2:13).

Having affected every part of us, the fall also affected the institution

of government. The short answer is that a simple government is no longer possible. Rather than submit to God in love and love one another, we now defy God and assert ourselves above one another.

If you're not so sure about this, have you ever been stuck in a parking lot on the Fourth of July after the fireworks? It's late, you're ready to go home... and each car happily yields that you might be on your way. You arrive home at a respectable hour, your children dutifully prepare for bed, and you sleep soundly... not to be awoken by the explosion of more fireworks around midnight.

We're sinners.

In this depraved state of strife and conflict, government's role isn't to recreate Eden or to somehow make heaven on earth. It can't, but it can provide order in the midst of what would otherwise devolve into chaos.

Let's return to Genesis, and look at the first cities. Between the time of Adam and Noah, bronze and iron-working developed as music and the arts advanced (Gen 4:17-22). We read of different leaders during this time. They had some level of order—governments. What do we know about these early governments? They were altogether corrupt (Gen 6:11). Society was thoroughly wicked:

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great
in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts
of his heart was only evil continually — Genesis 6:5.

I don't know how these societies ordered themselves, but I do know the orders they established displeased the Lord. It's a time when governments throughout the earth did little to uphold or enforce a moral standard. Man's basest desires ran free—that is, until God flooded the earth. After putting an end to the world, what followed was a new beginning through Noah.

The time from Adam to Noah saw the worst moral decline in the history of the world. Though the flood put an end to it, sin was not

destroyed. There's no reason to believe man would improve or avoid the decadence of the past. As the world repopulated, God gave the state a new tool: capital punishment (Gen 9:6). It meant that a man's hatred of his neighbor could only go so far. Should he end the life of his neighbor, the state had a right to end that man's life.

The world didn't improve after the flood, and capital punishment wasn't a cure. However, governments from the time of Noah to Moses did more to uphold a moral standard. The ancient Egyptians developed a code of law, as did the Sumerians and the Babylonians. These weren't God-fearing peoples, but each saw the need to enforce an orderly standard of conduct. They also understood the need for revision and expansion.

The general trend through history has been towards more laws. If man is a moral and upright being, ever evolving, that doesn't make sense. We should expect to see fewer laws as we improve ourselves. Yet, we don't. We see more. Consider the following three points in time:

Adam: Government with one civil law

Noah: Government with few civil laws

Moses: Government with many civil laws

The general trend has been from simple to complex, from few laws to many, but let's not stop here.

Do you have any idea how many federal laws and regulations existed during the time of Emperor Constantine? How about in America today? Though I can't give you an exact number, we have far more laws than ancient Rome. In fact, no one knows how many laws and regulations have been passed. It's beyond count! Thus, at this point in time we're left with the following:

Today: Government with countless civil laws

I doubt we need so much legislation, but as sin works its way through

the world like cancer, new ways to sin have been invented; old ways refined. What should governments do? Respond, of course, but realize that with each response the state becomes a bit more complex.

I've joked with friends that if I ever ran for public office, I would pledge to do absolutely nothing—the “it's broke, and you can't fix it” platform.

While this may appeal to our cynicism, the truth of the matter is that God requires government to do something. It exists to maintain a moral order. The problem is that government is a fallen institution trying to uphold that order for fallen men and women. There's nothing simple about it.

GOVERNMENT EXISTS TO GLORIFY GOD

I started perusing the bookshelf for a few resources on government. Some of my books encouraged political activism, and others yearned for a Christian America. A few spoke of the biblical commands to pray, pay your taxes, honor those in authority, and submit to them (1 Tim 2:1-4, Rom 13:1-7, 1 Pet 2:13-17). However, very little helped me grasp God's design for civil government.

It seems my library wasn't the problem, for after scanning a century's worth of evangelical journal articles, little turned up there either. I may not be the best researcher, but I believe there's a void in the literature. Much has been written on a believer's response to the state, but little of it helps us understand the state biblically.

Theology is much like curve-fitting in mathematics. You have a series of points that you'd like to explain with a line. Theology is like a line that explains the Bible's propositions or points. One of the points we've seen is that government exists to provide order. Another is that all things exist to the glory of God. Government, of course, is one of those things, which means government exists to glorify God.

Our nation, like any nation, was ultimately established by God to bring Him glory. Whether you believe America was a Christian nation

or not, Washington is not free to do as it likes.

Perhaps a problem among evangelicals is the way we view the things of life. Things such as Bible reading, prayer, church attendance, and even certain kinds of music are the “sacred” or Christian things of life. The ride to work, the game last night, eating fast food, and voting—those are the not-so-sacred or “secular” things.

Have you ever wondered what makes anything sacred or secular? I mean, is Bible-reading sacred just because you moved the book mark? Is the morning commute secular just because you weren’t driving to church or earnestly praying? Of course not.

To be secular means to be set apart *from* God, as if God and His “things” exist in one room while other “things” exist apart from Him somewhere else. This isn’t true of anything, nor is it true of you.

All that God created—government included—exists for one purpose: His glory (Rom 11:36). If you’re an unbeliever, you were created for God’s glory. If you’re a believer, you were created and then redeemed for it. So, the things of life are not sacred or secular. They’re the tools with which we bring God the glory that’s rightfully His (1 Cor 10:31, 1 Tim 4:4-5).

Jonathan Edwards was right when he wrote:

All that is ever spoken of in the Scripture as an ultimate end of God’s works is included in that one phrase, *the glory of God...* The refulgence shines upon and into the creature, and is reflected back to the luminary. The beams of glory come from God, and are something of God and are refunded back again to their original. So that the whole is of God, and in God, and to God, and God is the beginning, middle and end in this affair.⁴

God’s glory shines as light upon all people that they might reflect this glory back to Him. What an incredibly high and profound view! Even

the most mundane things of life exist for the purpose of exalting our great God and King.

The point is that nothing is truly secular in the sight of God. Political leaders and governments, even your next-door neighbor, may act as if God doesn't exist. We could say they act practically secular, but as surely as God reigns over all, no one is inherently secular. All exists for God's glory.

As we apply this to government, let's recall that it's an institution made of people. Do people have a right to dishonor God? They may choose to dishonor Him, but no one has that right. You may choose to cheat on your taxes or steal from the grocer, but it isn't a right. Much in the same way, governments may choose to dishonor the Lord—and they do—but it isn't their right to do so.

The King establishes governments to bring Him glory through the ways they order a particular nation. Thus, each is “under God” and required to provide order in a way that pleases Him.

LEGISLATING MORALITY

“You can't legislate morality!”

That's what I read in a *Chicago Tribune* editorial. It's a popular view, but I would like to challenge it. If you can't legislate morality, well, what can you legislate? All laws reflect someone's moral standard. We have laws about vehicular homicide and involuntary manslaughter, for instance. What do these reflect? They reflect the standard that murder is wrong.

Laws are practical applications of a moral standard... or at least, they should be. When you remove morality from law all that remains is the state creating laws on the basis of... the state. Whatever those in power posit as law *is* law.⁵

Consider the words of T.S. Eliot, “If you will not have God (and He is a jealous God) you should pay your respects to Hitler or Stalin.”⁶ Eliot

recognized that in the absence of God, law is nothing more than the whims of those in power. Remove the only absolute moral standard from Congress, and Congress will become a standard unto itself.⁷

America took a significant step in 1947 with *Everson v. Board of Education*. The Supreme Court separated church and state by a wall that's "high and impregnable."⁸ The court thought the two should be as two rooms in a house walled off from one another without a door between.

Whether the Justices realized it or not, they chose to sever the state from its only moral absolute—God. Yes, murder is still a crime today, but that's only because the state says so. It can't be wrong because God says so. That's a "church" argument.

The irony is that Congress still opens with prayer, and the name of God is mentioned everywhere in American history. Yet, Congress rarely considers a bill on the basis of God's moral will. U.S. law has little, if any, connection to the Lawgiver. What's accepted increasingly in America is non-religious, non-church, non-God talk and thinking. Thus, we're left with legislation that lacks an absolute foundation. It's been posited. It's right because those in power say it's right.

This causes me to think of the prophet Isaiah who warned that God is God, and there is no other (Isa 40-48). Isaiah understood that the Lord isn't one of many deities. No, He's revealed Himself as the only true God, the one "to whom we must give account" (Heb 4:13). Our "high and impregnable" wall is an affront to His rule over us.

Shouldn't there be a separation between church and state?

Yes, the two institutions should be separate, but let us not think that separating church and state means the removal of God from state. The basis for morality, for legislation, for government itself rests upon the Living God.

The problem is that we the people have come to believe we can create a world better than the one God created. We've come to think

we can shape our own destiny however we might like, choose our own morality, even define our gender. And we've elected people into office who will legislate accordingly.

Can you guess where this godless path will lead? I don't believe it will lead to hope and the broad, sunlit uplands of freedom and progress. Rather, it leads downward. Government, legislating the whims of those in power, never ends well. It's a path of oppression for the people that ends in judgment for those responsible.

The psalmist asked why the nations rage and plot against God? Why do they reject Him? Why do they govern as if He doesn't exist or isn't concerned? The psalmist says:

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us" — Psalm 2:1-3.

What is God's response to this? "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision" (Psa 2:4). God is King, sovereign over all governments, the One who charges each with a stewardship to order their nation in a manner pleasing to Him.

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 — Psalm 2:10-12a.

When we consider the future of our nation, we might feel afraid for our children or become angry. The psalmist looked higher and found comfort in the knowledge of God. God was his rock, his fortress, his protection. "Blessed are all who taken refuge in Him" (Psa 2:12b).

SPHERES OF AUTHORITY

George Orwell wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as Russia built her Eastern

Bloc in the year of 1949. Many weren't entirely sure what to make of Communism throughout preceding decades. In fact, the American press sometimes portrayed the Soviet Union as a "great moral experiment."⁹ Orwell wasn't so naïve.

Nineteen Eighty-Four introduces an all-powerful government, one that usurps family, church, commerce, and education. Big Brother orders all things in Oceania, even individual thought and identity. He can rewrite history, control the spoken language, create his own truth, and demand whole-hearted obedience. How? Through a network of surveillance technology that didn't exist when the book was written.

Orwell believed the goal of any authoritarian government is "power, pure power."¹⁰ And history has proven him correct many times over.

Government exists to provide an order pleasing to God by upholding His moral standard. This is why the state exists today, but it isn't the only institution. Church, family, and commerce are three institutions directly mentioned in Scripture. Each has a certain role, structure, and authority.

The church, for instance, is comprised of elders who lead the flock and deacons who serve (1 Tim 3:1-13). Family involves a husband leading and loving his wife, while commerce involves employers managing their employees (Eph 6:1-9).

Now let's say your employer told you to remodel your home this weekend. Suppose your pastor said you can't send your children to a public school. Maybe tomorrow Congress will place a ban on large sodas.

What's not right here? Authority. Your employer has no authority over the stewardship of your family. Though pastors should teach on parenting, they have no authority over your children. I'm not a fan of carbonated beverages, but does government have the God-given authority to ban them? No, because government isn't God's steward of your body—you are.

The institutions that God ordained have a God-given sphere of authority. The Dutch theologian and statesman, Abraham Kuyper is helpful here:

Now in all of these spheres or circles the cogwheels engage one another, and it is precisely because of the mutual interaction of these spheres that there is an emergence of that rich, many-sided, multi-formed human life...¹¹

Kuyper viewed government and family, for instance, as two independent spheres. Independent, though not isolated, because government should be a blessing to your family; your family should be a blessing to government. And yet, he warns:

that one sphere may encroach upon the neighboring sphere; thus causing a wheel to jerk and to break cog upon cog, and interfering with the progress of the whole.¹²

Government has the right to enforce laws, but it can also abuse that right. Rather than multiple institutions working to the glory of God, governments sprawl. They begin to view the institutions of church, family, and business as threats to be swallowed up and devoured. A one-institution society emerges, an all-powerful state where the authority of all other institutions is restricted.

I can't say the Bible tells us the best form of government. A God-honoring government could be a republic like ours. It could also be a monarchy or an oligarchy. Regardless of form, God ordained the state to serve Him by providing order within its proper sphere.

Governments must be big enough to provide order, and yet, there's a danger, governments like to be big. They like to provide order upon other institutions.

We see this in Sweden and other likeminded nations where pastors are forbidden to preach against certain sins. In Greenland, it's illegal

for parents to homeschool their children. In France, businesses are required to pay half the cost of an employee's commute. This example may not seem as serious, but it's an overreach nonetheless. Like the first two examples, it has nothing to do with government upholding a moral order.

On the other hand, let's suppose a crime is concealed by a church leader. Let's say an employer strikes his intern or a family member abuses a child. Should the state look the other way? No, because the state exists to uphold and enforce God's moral will. It has a duty under God to respond.

Though the state often meddles with other institutions, not all involvement is meddling. Sometimes what we perceive as meddling is a sign that our government still has some people concerned about righteousness.

ACCOUNTABLE TO GOD

Louis XIV. He was all-things France, even declaring himself to be the embodiment of the French State: *L'état, c'est moi!* He could change the laws or even declare war with nothing more than the stroke of a pen. No Congress or Parliament to deal with, not even a Constitution stood in his way. He could do as he pleased... or so he thought.

What the "Sun King" failed to understand is that God would hold him accountable. Louis reigned only because God reigns. He was a lesser king established by the Great King, and after 72 years on the throne, Louis met his maker.

As we make our way to the end of this chapter, I would like to look at God's reign from the standpoint of Kings and Chronicles. After reading about each king, we find one of the following statements:

"He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord."

"He did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord."

For kings such as David, Asa, or Hezekiah, God generally approved

of their governance. For Omri, Ahab, and Manasseh, He did not. Not every king was as wicked as the next, but being less than evil isn't good. They generally did evil, and God judged them.

Now, I know, ancient Israel isn't modern America. Big differences! But one thing that hasn't changed: God reigns. The King who raised up David and Hezekiah is the same God who raised up Caesar, Charlemagne, and Napoleon. We have seen that no government is truly secular or untethered to God. Whether the political leaders recognize Him or not, He is, and they will be held accountable.

Let's look at a Gentile king mentioned in Daniel, Belshazzar. God says He "weighed in the balances" the reign of this monarch and found it "wanting" (Dan 5:27). So swift was God's judgment that within hours, the Persians conquered Babylon, and Belshazzar's kingdom came to an end.

And what can we say about the Gentile nations of Egypt (Acts 7:6-7), and Assyria (Isa 10:12)? God judged them as well. Though these existed long ago in "Bible-times," God still judges governments and nations today.

Most nations are mentioned nowhere in Scripture, but do they need to be? It's like asking if you need a verse for every single thing you must do in life. Imagine the volumes! You don't need a revelation that says to pay your parking fines because the Bible says to submit to the authorities God has established (Rom 13:1-2). Scripture is filled with overarching principles like this. A lack of direct teaching doesn't mean God's Word is silent or ambivalent, but that you may need to study more.

America isn't mentioned in the Bible, but God is. And what I know of Him is that He judged nations and peoples long ago for their sins. Though times have changed, God's holiness has not. He will judge the nations that exist today.

Two verses come to mind, and the first is to "be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord" (Jas 5:1). Writing to groups of

persecuted believers, James told them to remember that God knows. He sees every wrong done against them and will hold the guilty accountable. For now, they were to be patient. All will be made right in God's time.

And this leads me to Paul's command to pray for the salvation of our political leaders (1 Tim 2:1-4). As I consider what it means to stand before God, to be accountable for your own sins, nothing could be so terrifying. Indeed, pray for them.

CONCLUSION

As we come to the end of this booklet, government exists to provide order in a manner pleasing to God. It's a fallen institution, one that often oversteps its sphere of authority and acts secularly. Eventually the order every government provides unravels as one state is replaced by another, and then another.

It's sad that all governments abuse their power, fail the people, and eventually fall apart. Yet, God created this institution for our good and His glory (Rom 13:4).

I rejoice when our political leaders uphold righteousness, but I'm reminded of the ways they fail. As good as we may have it here, we know our government is a far cry from God's intent.

If you're disappointed by the failures of our political leaders today, may each setback remind you there's something better in store for us who have trusted Christ. The hymn writer, Isaac Watts, looked ahead when he wrote, *Jesus Shall Reign*. The first and last verses have some of my favorite lines:

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Does his successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

The saints shall flourish in His days
Dressed in the robes of joy and praise;
Peace, like a river, from His throne
Shall flow to nations yet unknown.

Long for a better country, my friend (Heb 11:16). Christ is coming!
Long for the day when “the kingdom of this world will become the
kingdom of our Lord and His Christ, and He shall reign forever and
ever” (Rev 11:15).

Only then with Christ as King, will you and I see government as
government was meant to be.

NOTES

- 1 Richard Nixon, Interview with David Frost, *The Nixon Interviews*, part 3: “War at Home and Abroad,” *60 Minutes*, CBS, May 19, 1977.
- 2 Jeffrey M. Jones, “Americans’ Trust in Political Leaders, Public at New Lows,” *Gallup.com*, Sept. 21, 2016, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/195716/americans-trust-political-leaders-public-new-lows.aspx> (accessed Oct. 23, 2016). Americans who had a great deal or fair amount of trust in political leaders was 63% in 2004. It stands at 42% at present. Thus, a 33% drop in twelve years.
- 3 Grover Norquist, Interview with Mara Liasson, *Morning Edition*, NPR, May 25, 2001.
- 4 Jonathan Edwards, “The Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 526, 531.
- 5 An unbiblical alternative to natural law is the legal theory of positivism. Positivists believe the basis for law isn’t a matter of absolute right and wrong, but the state. Laws are no more than rules “posited” by the state.
- 6 T.S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (1948; reprint, Fort Washington, PA: Harvest Books, 1977), 50.
- 7 Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 1:13. Furthermore, “If no divine law is recognized above the law of the State, then the law of man has become absolute in men’s eyes—there is then no logical barrier to totalitarianism” (Greg Bahnsen, *By This Standard* [Tyler TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985; reprint, 1998], 245).
- 8 *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1 (1947).
- 9 SparkNotes Editors, “1984,” *SparkNotes.com*, 2007, <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/1984/themes.html> (accessed Oct. 20, 2016). For more depth, see: Kimberly Hupp, “‘Uncle Joe’: What Americans Thought of Joseph Stalin Before and After World War II,” master’s thesis, University of Toledo, 2007.
- 10 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949; reprint, New York: Signet, 1961), 263.
- 11 Abraham Kuyper, trans. by George Kamps, “Sphere Sovereignty,” Inaugural Address at the Free University, Amsterdam, Netherlands, October 20, 1880.
- 12 *Ibid.*

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