

A BIBLICAL VIEW ON
Government

Kerby Anderson



Government



Government affects our lives daily. It tells us how fast to drive. It regulates our commerce. It protects us from foreign and domestic strife. Yet we rarely take the time to consider its basic function. What is a biblical view of government? Why do we have a government? What kind of government does the Bible allow?

Developing a Christian view of government is difficult since the Bible does not provide an exhaustive treatment of government. This itself is perhaps instructive and provides some latitude for these institutions to reflect the needs and demands of cultural situations.

Because the Bible does not speak directly to every area of political discussion, Christians often hold different views on political issues. However, Christians are not free to believe whatever they want. Christians should not abandon the Bible when they begin to think about these issues because there is a great deal of biblical material that can be used to judge political options.

Human Nature

The Bible describes two elements of human nature. This viewpoint is helpful in judging government systems. Because humans are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27), they can exercise judgment and rationality. However, humans are also fallen creatures (Genesis 3). This human sinfulness (Rom. 3:23) has therefore

created a need to control evil and sinful human behavior through civil government.

Many theologians have suggested that the only reason we have government today is to control sinful behavior because of the Fall. But there is every indication that government would have existed even if we lived in a sinless world. For example, there seems to be some structuring of authority in the Garden (Genesis 1–2). Human beings are created in the image of God and thus are responsible to the commands of God. We are created by a God of order (1 Corinthians 14:33); therefore, we also seek order through governmental structures.

A Christian view of human nature provides a basis to judge various political philosophies. For example, Christians must reject political philosophies which ignore human sinfulness. Many utopian political theories are based on this flawed assumption.

In *The Republic*, Plato proposed an ideal government where the enlightened philosopher-kings would lead the country. The Bible, however, teaches that all are sin-

ful (Romans 3:23). Plato's proposed leaders would also be affected by the sinful effects of the Fall (Genesis 3). They would not always have the benevolent and enlightened disposition necessary to lead the republic.

Christians should also reject a Marxist view of government. Karl Marx believed that human nature was conditioned by society, and in particular, the capitalist economy. His solution was to change the economy so that you would change human nature. Why do we have greed? Marx believed it was because we live in a greedy capitalist society. He taught that if society changed the economy from capitalism to socialism and then communism, greed would cease.

Christians should reject the utopian vision of Marxism because it is based upon an inaccurate view of human nature. The Bible teaches that believers can become new creatures (2 Cor. 5:17) through spiritual conversion, but that does not mean that the effects of sin are completely overcome in this life. The Bible also teaches that we will continue to live in a world tainted by sin.

The view of Karl Marx contradicts biblical teaching by proposing a new man in a new society perfected by man's own efforts.

Since civil government is necessary and divinely ordained by God (Romans 13:1–7), it is ultimately under God's control. It has been given three political responsibilities: the sword of justice (to punish criminals), the sword of order (to thwart rebellion), and the sword of war (to defend the state).

As citizens, Christians have been given several responsibilities. They are called to render service and obedience to the government (Matthew 22:21). Because it is a God-ordained institution, they are to submit to civil authority (1 Peter 2:13–17) as they would to other institutions of God.

Christians, however, are not to give total and final allegiance to the secular state. Other God-ordained institutions exist in society alongside the state. Christians' final allegiance must be to God. They are to obey civil authorities (Romans 13:5) to avoid anarchy and chaos, but there may be times when they may be forced to disobey (Acts 5:29).

Because government is a divinely ordained institution, Christians have a responsibility to work within governmental structures to bring about change. Government is part of the order of creation and a minister of God (Romans 13:4). Christians are to obey governmental authorities (Romans 13:1–4, 1 Peter 2:13–14). Christians are also to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13–16) amid the political context.

Although governments may be guilty of injustice, Christians should not stop working for justice or cease to be concerned about human rights. We do not give up on marriage as an institution simply because there are so many divorces, and we do not give up on the church because of many internal problems. Each God-ordained institution manifests human sinfulness and disobedience. Our responsibility as Christians is to call political leaders back to this God-ordained task. Government is a legitimate sphere of Christian service, and so we should not look to government only when our rights are being abused. We are to be concerned

with social justice and should see governmental action as a legitimate instrument to achieve just ends.

A Christian view of government should also be concerned with human rights. Human rights in a Christian system are based on a biblical view of human dignity. A bill of rights, therefore, does not grant rights to individuals but instead acknowledges these rights as already existing. The writings of John Locke along with the Declaration of Independence capture this idea by stating that government is based on the inalienable rights of individuals. Government based on atheism, however, would not see rights as inalienable, and thus opens the possibility for the state to redefine what rights its citizens may enjoy. The rights of citizens in a republic, for example, are articulated in terms of what the government is forbidden to do. But in totalitarian governments, while the rights of citizens may also be spelled out, power ultimately resides in the government, not the people.

A Christian view of government also

recognizes the need to limit the influence of sin in society. This is best achieved by placing certain checks on governmental authority. This protects citizens from the abuse or misuse of governmental power which results when sinful individuals are given too much governmental control.

The greatest threat to liberty comes from the exercise of power. History has shown that power is a corrupting force when placed in human hands. In the Old Testament theocracy, there was less danger of abuse because the head of state was God. The Bible amply documents the dangers that ensued when power was transferred to a single king. Even David, a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22), abused his power and Israel experienced great calamity (2 Samuel 11–21).

Governmental Authority

A key question in political theory is how to determine the limits of governmental authority. With the remarkable growth in the size and scope of government in the last century, it is necessary to clearly define

the lines of governmental authority. The Bible provides some guidelines.

However, it is often difficult to set limits or draw lines on governmental authority. As already noted, the Old Testament theocracy differed from our modern democratic government. Although human nature is the same, drawing biblical principles from an agrarian, monolithic culture and applying them to a technological, pluralistic culture requires discernment.

As Christians, we recognize that God has ordained other institutions besides civil government that exercise authority in their sphere of influence. This contrasts with other political systems that see the state as the sovereign agent over human affairs, exercising sovereignty over every other human institution. A Christian view is different.

The first institution is the church (Hebrews 12:18–24; 1 Peter 2:9–10). Jesus taught that the government should work in harmony with the church and should recognize its sovereignty in spiritual matters (Matthew 22:21).

The second institution is the family (Ephesians 5:22–32, 1 Peter 3:1–7). The family is an institution under God and His authority (Genesis 1:26–28, 2:20–25). When the family breaks down, the government often must step in to protect the rights of the wife (in cases of wife abuse) or children (in cases of child abuse or adoption). The biblical emphasis, however, is not so much on rights as it is on responsibilities and mutual submission (Ephesians 5:21).

A third institution is education. Children are not the wards of the state but belong to God (Psalm 127:3) and are given to parents as a gift from God. Parents are to teach their children (Deuteronomy 4:9) and may also entrust them to tutors (Galatians 4:2).

In an atheistic system of government, the institutions of church and family are usually subordinated to the state. Ultimately the state becomes a substitute god and is given additional power to adjudicate disputes and bring order to a society. Since institutions exist by permission of the state, there is always the possibility that a new

social contract will allow government to intervene in the areas of church and family.

A Christian view of government recognizes the sovereignty of these spheres. Governmental intervention into the spheres of church and family is necessary in certain cases where there is a threat to life, liberty, or property. Otherwise, civil government should recognize the sovereignty of other God-ordained institutions.

As Christians, we should strive to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16) and work within the government that God has ordained (Romans 13:1-7). Those of us who live in America are privileged to be able to work within a representative form of government that provides us with the freedom to choose our representatives. We therefore have the privilege and the opportunity to influence our government in significant ways. We should be grateful to God for the privilege we enjoy and be good stewards of that responsibility.

Additional Resources

Kerby Anderson, *A Biblical Point of View on Constitutional Interpretation*, POV booklet, 2018.

Kerby Anderson, *A Biblical Point of View on the Federalist Papers*, POV 2021.

Kerby Anderson, *A Biblical Point of View on Civil Disobedience*, POV 2020.

Kerby Anderson, *Christians and Government*, Cambridge, OH: Christian Publishing House, 2016.

John Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1987.



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