

GOD AND GOVERNMENT

A Biblical, Historical,
and Constitutional Perspective

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CONTENTS

Foreword	ix
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Preface	x
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PART 1: DEFINING GOVERNMENT

<i>1: Self-Government and Family Government</i>	5
<i>2: Ecclesiastical Government and Civil Government</i>	35
<i>3: The Origin and Development of Civil Government</i>	51
<i>4: The Purpose and Function of Civil Government</i>	67
<i>5: The Biblical Form of Civil Government</i>	79
<i>6: Jesus and Civil Government</i>	95
<i>7: The Christian History of The United States</i>	115
<i>8: The Purpose of the United States Constitution</i>	139
<i>9: The Relationship of Church and State in the Bible</i>	167
<i>10: The Relationship of Church and State in the First Amendment</i>	179

PART 2: ISSUES IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

<i>11: Developing a Biblical Worldview</i>	199
<i>12: Worldviews in Conflict</i>	221
<i>13: Sovereignty and Dominion</i>	243
<i>14: Sovereignty and Ownership</i>	267
<i>15: Financing the Work of God's Kingdom</i>	291

<i>16: Financing the Responsibilities of the State</i>	307
<i>17: Biblical Economics</i>	331
<i>18: The Enemies of Biblical Economics</i>	353
<i>19: The Causes of Poverty</i>	373
<i>20: The Conquest of Poverty</i>	395

PART 3: THE RESTORATION OF THE REPUBLIC

<i>21: The Biblical View of Authority</i>	421
<i>22: The Enemies of Biblical Authority</i>	451
<i>23: God's Sovereignty Over the Nations</i>	485
<i>24: Establishing Christian Leadership</i>	507
<i>25: The Restoration of the Republic</i>	541
<i>26: The Foundation of Law</i>	579
<i>27: The Administration of Justice</i>	605
<i>28: Human Rights and Responsibilities</i>	629
<i>29: Sovereignty and Education</i>	661
<i>30: The Future of Government</i>	695

Appendix: <i>What is Government?</i>	717
Scripture Index	727
Topical Index	751
Recommended Reading	775

CHAPTER 1

Self-Government and Family Government

What is government? When this question is asked, most people respond by equating government with politics. Even our language reflects the confusion: "Government? It's in Washington," or "The government will take care of its citizens through its many programs." Both of these statements reflect a misunderstanding of the true nature of government. They indicate that the only governing institution is a political one. Historically, however, the term "government" was always qualified in some way, unlike our present-day definitions.

Our educational system reflects the same confusion. A generation ago, high school classes dealing with government at the state level were given the title "Civics." The emphasis was on the function of government in *civil* matters. This is no longer the case. Such classes are now given the broad title of "Government" implying that the many governments are absorbed into one all-encompassing political government.

Before World War I, textbooks dealing with national government were qualified with the title "Civil." An example of this can be seen in a textbook used in 1903: *Elements of Civil Government*. According to its author, "The family . . . is a form of government, established for the good of children themselves, and the first government that each of us must obey."¹ The book continues by defining five areas of civil government: "the township or civil district, the village or the city, the county, the State, and the United States."² The term "government" as the older educational definition indicates, is broader than the State. Textbook writers were aware that

1. Alex L. Peterman, *Elements of Civil Government* (New York, NY: American Book Company, [1891] 1903), 5.

2. Peterman, *Elements of Civil Government*, 5.

there were personal (self), family, church, educational (under the direction of the family), and civil governments, each having a legitimate realm of authority. The State was seen as only one government among many.

To deny the validity of the many governments and the responsibilities that each has under God, would be to deny the authority that belongs to each of them in their designated realm of activity. If we as individuals neglect our personal governing duties, then we can expect the State to assume the role of all other legitimate governments and claim to be the sole government, while labeling all others as counterfeits. Therefore, to see the State as the only governing institution "is destructive of liberty and of life."³



The moral principles and precepts contained in the scriptures ought to form the basis of all our civil constitutions and laws. All the miseries and evils which men suffer from vice, crime, ambition, injustice, oppression, slavery, and war, proceed from their despising or neglecting the precepts contained in the Bible.

—Noah Webster

The concept of the multiplicity of governments is as old as our country because the principles were extracted from biblical principles. Noah Webster's definition of government in his *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828) reflects the biblical concept of the diversity of governmental authority. Webster defined government in this way: "Direction; regulation. 'These precepts will serve for the government of our conduct.' Control; restraint. 'Men are apt to neglect the government of their temper and passions.'"

While Webster defined government in terms of personal self-control, most modern definitions largely limit government to the realm of institutions, especially civil or statist governments. This is made evident by the fact that the definition for *civil* government is placed first in modern

3. R. J. Rushdoony, *Politics of Guilt and Pity* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, [1970] 1995), 332.

dictionaries. Nowhere are self- or family governments even listed. For example, *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1972) defines government in this way: "The exercise of authority over a state, district, organization, institution, etc."

In the older definition, Webster includes family government as part of the complete definition before he deals with the government of an individual state or nation. He defines family government as: "The exercise of authority by a parent or householder. 'Children are often ruined by a neglect of government in parents.'" According to the Bible, it is the duty of parents to govern in the home: "And fathers, do not provoke your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). It is not the duty of civil government to interfere with the affairs of the family. Too often, however, parents neglect their God-given duty to raise their children in the "nurture and admonition of the Lord." When this happens, we can expect the State to take an increasingly dominant role in family life. Such a role is detrimental to the family.

If generations continue to be indoctrinated with the modern definition of "government," they will neglect their own personal, family, church, and local governing duties. Each generation will become more dependent on the "benevolent" State for care and security. We are beginning to see such a trend. "Today, most Americans have lost their faith in Christ as Savior, and they expect civil government to be their savior. They have no desire for the responsibilities of self-government, and so they say to politicians, 'Do thou rule over us.' Instead of Jesus Christ as their good shepherd, they elect politicians to be their shepherds on a program of socialistic security for all."⁴

Government then, within our American Christian heritage which was formulated from biblical principles, begins with the individual and extends outward to include all institutions. Presently, however, most Americans are unaware of the varied nature of government. The civil government has assumed responsibility to be *the* government. It is sad that many Americans are thankful that Washington has relieved them from what they believe is the heavy burden of governing themselves, their families, churches, and schools. If the people of the United States do not once again establish self-

4. R. J. Rushdoony, *Law and Liberty* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, [1971] 2009), 77-78.

family, church, local, state, and national governments in their proper places of power and authority, our nation is doomed.

The central focus of all realms of government is the regenerating work of Jesus Christ. Institutions and civil governments are made up of people who are governed by the condition of their hearts. If the heart is in rebellion against God, we can expect undisciplined and ungovernable people. If the heart has been made new in Christ, we can expect a people who will govern their lives according to the governing principles of Scripture. A. A. Hodge speaks of the essence of the new heart, regeneration, as consist-



The civil government of the United States is decentralized. We are a single nation made up of a number of sovereign states. The many states created the single nation: *E Pluribus Unum* (out of many, one). The stability of all these governments is dependent upon the self-governed individual under God's government.