

A Christian View on Government

The Reason for Government

The civil authority "is God's servant for your good" (Rom 13:4). Government is meant to protect its citizens from certain evils. In the NT believers are invited to pray for their government officials so that they will be protected (1 Tim 2:2).

1. Protection against crime

a. The Bible teaches that prevention of crime is a primary responsibility of civil governments (1 Pet 2:14; Rom 13:4, Eccl 8:11; Prov 17:15; Isa 5:22-23).

2. Protection against disease

Epidemics of disease have economic implications in reducing productive work, hindering economic growth.

3. Protection against the violations of contracts

Violation of contracts creates a hostile environment for businesses and business transactions (Ex 20:15-16).

4. Protection against violations of patents and copyrights

If a nation decides not to protect patents and copyrights (i.e. China), it encourages people to steal (Ex 20:15).

5. Protection against foreign invasion

When Israel did evil, God allowed them to be conquered (Judg 6:3-6), but when they repented and prayed and obeyed God, he brought the blessing of deliverance (several times in Judges; see also 1 Sam 17). The result of the Lord's blessing was safety (1 Kgs 4:25), giving skill to soldiers to defend (Ps 18:34).

6. Avoidance of wars of conquest and civil wars

7. Protection against destruction of the environment

a. Economically productive nations must protect natural resources from careless human destruction.

b. The Bible teaches that God has given mankind responsibility for stewardship of the environment (Gen 1:28; Ps 8).

Things government should promote. The Bible does not mandate these things, but pursuing these things will create a stable order.

1. Universal education

The Bible emphasizes the responsibility of parents to train their children (Deut 6:5-7; Ps 1:2). While public schools and public education are seldom a good thing, access to literacy programmes, training centres, and means for citizens to become more skilled is a good thing.

2. Stable family structures

- a. A child growing up in a family with both father and mother present is far less likely to end up in poverty.
- b. Governments should adopt laws that provide incentives to getting/staying married and for raising children.

3. Laws that protect freedom of religion for all religious groups and give some benefits to religions generally.

- a. Religions generally teach good moral values to citizens, and bring good to society, including economic benefits.
- b. Denial of freedom of religion means that many economically productive people are kept out of a country.

Forms of Government:

Monarchy – Absolute (e.g. Swaziland), Constitutional (United Kingdom)

Oligarchy – power resides in a few people or a class of people, e.g. North Korea, Russia

Democracy – direct democracy (representative democracy)

Autocracy – power resides in one.

The Bible does not call for one system over another, and God's people have lived under each of these forms. What the Bible has done is shape the thinking about humanity, civilisation, power for 3500 years, which has affected political experiments through the centuries. Only one form of government will ever be perfect: a Theocracy under Christ. Until then, we must seek the best kind of government that factors in the fallenness and sinfulness of man.

Factors that deliver a nation from tyranny or anarchy:

1. Rule of law: all people are equally accountable to the laws

- a. This is the most basic guarantee that leaders will use their power for the benefit of the people as a whole. (2 Samuel 11-12);

2. Fair court system: courts show no favoritism or bias, but enforce justice impartially

- a. The courts are the primary means for guaranteeing that everyone in a nation is subject to the rule of law.
- b. The Bible strongly emphasizes that judges must be fair and not pervert justice (Deut 16:18-20; Ex 23:3).

3. Absence of bribery and corruption in government offices

- a. Again and again in the Bible officials are warned against taking bribes.

i. Ex 23:8; Pss 26:10; 82:2; Prov 15:27; 17:23; 24:23; Isa 33:15; Ezek 22:12.

b. Government officials should be reasonably compensated for their service, but laws should prevent them from becoming wealthy through 'gifts' or promises received while they are in office. Bribery and thus corruption have enormously hindered economic development in Eastern Europe, pre-British India, and in many African societies. Similar corruption is common in communist countries generally and in many Islamic countries.

. The OT wisely warned against a powerful official such as a king becoming wealthy while in office (Deut 17:17).

i. Positive examples: Samuel (1 Sam 12:3-4); Paul to Timothy (1 Tim 5:21)

4. Adequate power of government

a. Governments must have enough power to maintain their own stability.

=a "lack of centralization" in a government leads to disorder and poverty. The Bible recognizes the evil that results when there is no effective government and anarchy prevails. Judges 17-21 shows what happens when there is no effective government at all (Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).

5. Limited power of government

a. The power of a government must be limited enough so that it does not take too much freedom from the people.

i. Tradeoff between government power and individual freedom. (greater power = greater potential of corruption)

c. In the United States there are many provisions in the Constitution designed to limit the power of government: i. 1) Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and freedom of assembly, 2) Freedom to petition the government for redress of grievances, 3) Right to bear arms, 4) Term limits for the office of president, and 5) Regular election of members of Congress.

6. Separation of powers in government

c. In the Bible several passages support the ideas of limited governmental power and separation of powers.

i. The OT gives many examples of kings who had unchecked power and abused it: Saul, David (2 Sam 11), Solomon (1 Kings 11:3-4; 10:14-20 cf. Deut 17:17), the divided monarchy (1-2 Kings; 1-2 Chronicles).

ii. The Bible also contains a number of positive examples of divided power: Tribes, clans and families in the OT, the calling of 12 apostles (Matt 10:1-4; Acts 1:15-26), shared roles as seen with Peter and James as the spokesman for the apostles (Acts 2:14; 3:12; 15:7; 15:13; 21:18; Gal 1:19; 2:9, 12), the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:22), and government of local churches by elders (Titus 1:5; James 5:14).

7. Government accountability to the people

- a. Regular, fair elections, free access to information about government actions and spending, and term limits for the most powerful offices all help to insure such accountability.
- b. Examples in scripture indicate that government works best with the consent of those who are governed. i. Ex 4:29-31; 1 Sam 7:5-6; 1 Sam 10:24; 2 Sam 2:4; Acts 6:3.
- c. There are negative examples in scripture of tyrants who did not gain the consent of the people but ruled harshly. i. Rehoboam (1 Kings 12:15), Pharaoh (Ex 3:9-10), Philistines (Judg 14:4), Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kgs 25:1-21).

Should a Christian Vote?

A Christian in a democracy has, by birthright, been given responsibility to govern the nation, through an elected representative. The problem with representative democracy is that unless you run for office yourself, you will seldom find a representative who represents you exactly. We are forced to choose between principled voting or pragmatic voting.

If we vote on **principle**, we vote for the representative who most closely represents our vision of society and government, regardless of his or her chances at overall success.

If we vote **pragmatically**, we vote for the *least evil* representative, or for the most likely contender to the party we do not wish to see in government.

Ethics sometimes requires a 'greater-good' choice, or a limiting 'evil' choice. However, there are certain matters where the pragmatism in question could become evil:

Right to life: no one we vote for should be in favour of murdering the unborn.

Justice: no one we vote for should be in favour of rehabilitating convicted murderers.

Theft: no one we vote for should be in favour of taking another's private property.

To abstain from voting altogether should usually be because you see no viable representative. This is then an abstention out of conscience. We should not refuse to vote out of apathy, disdain or cynicism.

Civil Disobedience

We know from the example of Daniel, the apostles, and the Hebrew midwives, that we do not have to obey government at all times. When are we permitted to disobey. Two positions have emerged:

Antipromulgation	Anticompulsion
When it permits evil	When it commands evil
When it promulgates evil laws	When it compels evil actions
When it limits freedom	When it negates freedom

When it is politically oppressive	When it is religiously oppressive
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Biblically, we see the anti-compulsion position:

Refusal to kill babies (Ex 1:15-21)

Refusal to worship an idol (Dan 3)

Refusal to pray to the king and not to God (Dan 6)

Refusal to stop preaching (Acts 4:18)

Refusal to worship the antiChrist (Rev 13)

Civil Disobedience should be non-violent resistance, not violent rebellion.

How to Respond to Oppressive Governments

1. Pray for them (1 Tim 2:1-2)
2. Work peacefully and legally to change government.
3. Disobey oppressive commands. (Dan 3, 6)
4. Flee Oppressive Governments (1 Kings 18)
5. Patiently Endure Suffering (1 pet 4:12-13)
6. Trust the Providence of God (Rom 12:19)

What about revolution?

Revolution = violent fight against existing government.

a. God exhorts against joining revolutionaries (Prov 24:21)

b. Revolutions are condemned (Korah, Absalom, Jereboam). The God-ordained revolution against Athalia was necessary to preserve the bloodline of Messiah.

c. Israel didn't fight Pharaoh, it fled.

d. Jesus exhorted against using the sword for that reason (Mat 26:52), or retaliating against others, including government (Matt 5:38-39)

Adapted from Wayne Grudem & Norm Geisler