

Theology of Civil Government

What God has said is the only appropriate place to begin consideration of any belief or practice for any individual or group. The following theology of civil government was written with the AACS and the current generation in mind, which is not to suggest that the theology of civil government changes from organization to organization or from generation to generation! It was so written to limit the scope of this “theology”! This theology was written not to be read and forgotten, but to be an immediately applied “lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our path” in the coming, God-willing, glory days of the AACS!

Government is defined in the American Heritage Dictionary as “the act or process of governing, especially the control and administration of public policy in a political unit.” While the term “civil government” does not appear in the KJV, the concept certainly does, as is presented in this paper. The following definition flows out of the study behind this written theology.

Civil government may be defined as **the administration of justice**, including its determination and enforcement, within political entities. Civil government is an extension of the sovereignty of God, which doctrine permeates every page of scripture. Initially, 1315 rather direct references to civil government¹ were identified in preparation for this theology.² That number expanded considerably in the writing. The Bible is not only the book of life; it is the book of government!

I. What is the source of government?

A. in the beginning

In the beginning, God created all things, including government: thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers; all things were created by Him and for Him, and by Him all things (including government) consist (Gen. 1:1; Col. 1:16,17). God’s kingdom, from the beginning, rules over all (Ps. 103:19); that is, He is sovereign: “what His soul desireth, even that He doeth” (Job 23:13). “There is no power (government) but of God” (Rom. 13:1).

In the beginning, God created man, giving him choice (Gen. 2:16,17), the ability to rule himself either according to the will (word) of God, or according to the will of something less than God (man himself). God also delegated to man dominion over the rest of creation (Gen. 1:26-28). God did not tell the first man to rule (have government) over (decide for) others before the fall.

B. after the fall

After the fall, God continued as the ultimate source of all authority. What changed was man’s innate attitude toward authority. Upon Adam’s sin (Gen. 3:1-6), rebellion against authority became man’s bent (Is. 53:6; Rom. 5:12; 3:12). That rebellion ultimately was expressed against human authority (government) since “there is no [government]³ but of God” (Rom. 13:1). God expresses His will through authority (Pro. 16:10), and it is God’s will against which man rebels. A primary purpose of government became to restrain human depravity which resulted from the fall.

¹ When we hear the word “government” we tend to think **civil** government, forgetting that there is also **family** government and **church** government. We forget that there is no government in any sphere but of God, and we tend to subordinate the authority of the home and the church to that of the state. Perhaps it is because the state is more visible than the home and the church, especially in its enforcement, and we are creatures of sight more than creatures of faith. At times, certainly, the authority of the home and church are subordinated to that of the state (e.g., removing children from a truly abusive home), and vice versa.

² The theology of civil government is consistent between the two testaments (Romans 13:1ff with Daniel’s example of obedience to the Babylonian and Persian governments; Heb. 13:8), which is not to say that Israel was not dealt with uniquely by God (Rom. 3:1,2). With reference to the uniquely-chosen national of Israel, religion and civil government were one and the same (Thurmond Wisdom).

³ Strong’s Bible dictionary lists “government” as an alternate rendering for the word “power” (Greek *exosia*) in verses such as Rom. 13:1. *Exosia* could be more literally translated “authority” than “power.” Often the word “power” in the KJV is a translation the Greek word *dunamis* (from which we get our word “dynamite.” In these cases, the word relates more to the power of overcoming opposition.

After man sinned, God told the woman that her husband would rule over her (Gen. 3:10) which established the first of this kind of rule of one image-bearer over another.⁴ After the earth was destroyed with a flood because of the unrestrained wickedness of man (Gen. 6:5-7), God directed that “whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed” (Gen. 9:6), thus authorizing man to restrain evil through the death penalty.^{5,6} This first mention of what later was specified as “bearing the sword” (Job 19:29; Rom. 13:4) established man as God’s deputy in administering civil (“relating to citizens”) government (“justice”). The shedding of man’s blood is significant because it disrespects the image of God in man (Gen. 9:6).

C. God’s continued sovereignty

“God ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever He will” (Dan. 4:17). “There is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” (Rom. 13:1).⁷ He increases the nations, and destroys them (Job 12:23-25). God permits even evil governments to exist as part of His sovereign plan, until His kingdom comes (Mt. 6:10,13) and every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:10-16; Rev. 11:15; 19:11-16). God now gives all men everywhere time to repent of their disobedience to His authority (Acts 17:30,31).

All power (government) has been given to Christ by the Father (Mt. 28:18; Col. 2:10). While Christ is now Prince of the kings of the earth (Rev. 1:5), in the consummation of all, He will be King of kings, and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:16). His kingdom will come (Mt. 6:10), and He shall reign forever and ever (Rev. 11:15).

II. What is the nature of government?

A. government is force and has morality

Government is force (Ezra 4:23; Ec. 8:4; Rom. 13:3-5). Government also is moral in that it speaks to what is right and wrong in behavior (I Ki. 9:3-9).^{8,9} Lawful (that is, scripturally-consistent) government is just (II Sam. 23:2) so that lawful government includes both the right to speak or judge (Lk. 12:13,14) and the right to enforce that directive or judgment (Rom. 13:5).¹⁰ Enforcement is through confrontation (Rom. 13:3,4). Good government executes judgment against an evil work speedily (Ec. 8:11) and sufficiently (Pro. 20:26).^{11,12}

⁴ I Timothy 2:12-14 indicates that God ordained an order of supervision/subordination even before the fall, though, of course, such subordination would have been willing and congenial.

⁵ Evil is restrained through the death penalty, both through its threat as well as through eliminating those individuals who have demonstrated a willingness to murder. Also, the death penalty encompasses all lesser civil penalties.

⁶ Even in the case of the “thrusting through” by Phinehas (Num. 25:8), Moses, the God-chosen civil authority, had previously authorized the death penalty (Num. 25:5). That administering the death penalty is not an individual citizen’s responsibility is clarified in Romans 12:19 which is followed immediately by Romans 13:4. The word “vengeance” in 12:19 is the same Greek word as the word “revenger” in 13:4.

⁷ Never is a civil government official in authority except that God places him there (Rom. 13:1); yet, the people are said to choose their leaders (Jdgs. 11:11; I Sam. 11:15; 12:12,13; II Sam. 3:21; 5:3; 5:12; I Ki. 12:1, 15, 20). The reconciliation of these two truths is the reconciliation of God’s sovereignty and man’s free will.

⁸ Good government rules consistently with the Word of God (I Ki. 15:11-13; II Ki. 23:4-25; Rom. 13:1-10). All good law is consistent with the Ten Commandments (Dt. 4:6-9; Dt. 17:18-20; Jms. 4:12) which reveal the character of God (Neh. 9:13-17; 10:29-39; Job 31:28; Rom. 13:1-10). Good laws are applications of the commands of God (Ps. 94:20; Zech. 8:16,17). All laws are based on some moral system, whether it be Judeo-Christian, Islamic, humanistic, or otherwise: governments legislate morality! The greatest civil danger is transgressing the law of God (I Ki. 18:18) and sanctioning evil (Ps. 94:20). Good civil government removes morally destructive influences (Neh. 13:1-9; Est. 1:22).

⁹ “Government” may be defined as the right and the might to speak and to enforce judgments within jurisdictions. “Civil” pertains to organized communities of people who surrender some autonomy (giving obedience and allegiance) in exchange for some protection.

¹⁰ Lawful government may be defined as government which directs or gives judgment inside of its jurisdiction and which is consistent with scripture. Unlawful government is that which directs or gives judgment outside of its jurisdiction or contrary to scripture.

¹¹ Two confrontation principles deserve note here. The “broken window” theory of crime teaches by example that when a broken window remains unfixed, criminals will break the other windows, not fearing enforcement. The other principle is summarized as “As little force as possible, as much as necessary.”

¹² While individuals are punished and rewarded in the next life, nations are judged in this life; that is, civil judgments occur in this life.

B. human government is limited

Human government is limited by God primarily by spheres of jurisdiction (Rom. 13:7). Three primary spheres are home (Gen. 2:24), state (Gen. 9:6), and church (Mt. 16:18,19).¹³

God's order to submit to every ordinance of man (I Pet. 2:13) is limited to the individual account each man must give to God (Rom. 14:12).¹⁴ Government becomes unlawful when it exceeds its divinely-imposed limitations (Dan. 3), and unlawful government is not to be obeyed (Acts 5:29). There is a time not to obey civil government even when there is no specific scripture forbidding compliance (Dan. 6:10). A civil ordinance may be "legal" (officially sanctioning and protecting certain behavior) but not morally right. Lawful government is that direction and force which is consistent with God's administration (Ps. 103:19).

C. human government is diffused

God establishes all spheres and levels of authority (Rom. 13:1), so all authorities are to be obeyed (I Pet. 2:13-17). When different authorities are giving irreconcilable commands, the higher authority (in appeal or in jurisdiction) is to be obeyed. If the higher authority lacks jurisdiction or is directing ungodliness, the other authority is to be obeyed (I Ki. 21:2,3). A godly magistrate gives godly leadership in spite of his superiors (I Ki. 18:3,4).¹⁵

D. government is divinely structured

God-ordained government is **rule by law** (Dt. 17:11) with **diffusion of power** among jurisdictions (Dt. 1:9-18) and is **representative** (Dt. 1:13). Enforceable contracts (Neh. 9:38ff) and private property are assumed (II Chron. 31:1) in a civil community which allows freedom of conscience (choice). Federalism characterized obedient Israel (Josh. 16:1ff), as did poll taxes (Ex. 30:12-15) and "constitutional law" (Dt. 4:11-14). Government includes **legislative** (Dt. 19:12), **judicial** (Dt. 1:16,17), and **executive** (Dt. 17:14,15) functions, all flowing from God (Is. 33:22).

E. human government is through the people

Each individual is given authority (jurisdiction, "power" – Rom. 13:1) to make decisions (Rom. 14:12). The authority for civil government flows from God through the people (Zech. 12:5).¹⁶ It is this authority which in part is delegated by each individual to his civil government which results in that civil government's "deriving [its] just powers from the consent of the governed."¹⁷ Civil government will not continue indefinitely apart from the consent of the governed (I Ki. 18:39,40). Lawful civil government is a three-way agreement between those in authority, the people, and God (II K. 11:17).

¹³It is better to say the church and the home are "immune" from the state's hegemony than that they are "exempt." Exemption implies a superior's granting a privilege to an inferior. The church existed in America before the nation (USA); its immunity is recognized by the First Amendment and not created by it. There is no mention of civil government in Acts 1 and 2 during the establishment of the church; but look at the interaction of the two spheres during the rest of Acts! Certainly there is overlapping in the jurisdictional spheres of home, church, and state, and a determination must be made as to which authority is higher (Rom. 13:1) in any conflicting situation.

¹⁴ For example, when a civil government directs a medical doctor to commit abortion or compels attendance at schools of atheism, the Christian is not to bow down (Dan. 3:18). When one sphere demands compliance in a matter outside of its jurisdiction, an individual may choose to comply for wrath's sake, but his compliance would not be for conscience's sake (Rom. 13:5). Acts 5:29 is the proof text for obeying God rather than man (that is, unlawful authority – here, temple authority). It is not always wrong to cooperate with an unlawful (i.e., a non-jurisdictional) governmental request (Mt. 17:24-27).

¹⁵The authority is responsible for the actions of those under him (I Ki. 21:8, 19, 25; II Chron. 34:33). His decisions affect those under him (I Chron. 21:17); he can lead them into sin (II Ki. 17:21; 21:9; II Chron. 21:13; 33:9; Is. 3:12; 9:16; Pro. 29:12) or into righteousness (II Ki. 22:3-7).

¹⁶ In Gen. 10:5 we see the "first mention" of "nations" which Hebrew term ("goy") may be translated "people" or "nation" which perhaps supports the concept that civil government derives its just power from the consent of the people.

¹⁷Declaration of Independence

F. government is related to freedom

True freedom involves the lack of restraints on legitimate activity (Ezra 6:6). Good government restrains evil and encourages good to the end that men are free to do any good and restrained from doing any evil (Rom. 13:3,4; I Pet. 2:14). It is the responsibility of civil government to protect the citizen's right to make religious choices without civil coercion (Josh. 24:15).

A man who does right does not need external restraint (Gal. 5:22,23). Restraint (government) holds back evil (Rom. 13:3,4). The more sin is present, the more restraint is needed (Neh. 9:37). Freedom has pitfalls for fallen man in that man's bent is to run to evil (Rom. 3:10-23).¹⁸

Freedom is a gift of God (Ezra 9:8,9) and results from keeping the law (Ps. 119:44, 45) and separating from those practicing abominations (Ezra 9:11-15). Freedom declines when iniquity abounds (Neh. 9:37). Eternal vigilance in the truth which sets men free is the price of freedom (Jn. 8:32-36).

III. What is the purpose of civil government?

A. administration of justice

The general purpose of civil government is to glorify God (Ex. 9:14) and bless man (II Chron. 9:8). A specific (and the primary) purpose of civil government is **the administration of justice** (Lev. 24:22) which includes its declaration (Dt. 1:16,17) and enforcement (II Sam. 8:15). The administration of justice results in **protection**, specifically the protection of home, church, and individuals in their pursuit of life (Gen. 9:6), liberty (Ex. 9:1), and happiness in God (Rom. 13:3,4). Good civil government protects the immunity of each divine, co-equal institution from interference by the other institutions: the family perpetuates the race physically and spiritually (Dt. 6:4-6); the church is the pillar and ground of the truth (I Tim. 3:15)¹⁹; and, the state administers justice among citizens, giving equal protection to all (Lev. 24:22).

B. other purposes of civil government

Civil government also serves to work the fear of God in the hearts of men (Dt. 17:12), restrain evil (Jdgs. 17:6), provide orderliness and quiet (I Tim. 2:1,2), defend the nation (Rom. 13:4), and lead the people (Ps. 78:70-72).

IV. What are some specific issues relating to a citizen's participation in civil government?

A. promotion of righteousness

Righteousness²⁰ exalts a nation, thereby glorifying God who ordained the nation (Pro. 14:34): it is the responsibility of citizens to promote righteousness by living righteous lives personally, as well as by influencing their community's corporate statements, practices, and leadership.²¹

Citizens promote righteousness by their individual lives through personal salvation in Christ and growth in righteousness (Phil. 1:11), personal submission to the law-word of God,²² and the fulfillment of obligations within the authority spheres of family, church, and state.

¹⁸ "Bind him down from mischief by the chains of the Constitution" (Thomas Jefferson).

¹⁹ The home and church are immune from the sovereignty (licensing) of the state in matters of education, which is not to say the state has no interest in physical safety, for example, in buildings used for education.

²⁰ Righteousness is the fulfillment of obligations, and a righteous man runs to his responsibilities in all spheres.

²¹ God judges nations for the actions of their leaders (I Chron. 21:1-12). How much greater should that judgment be when a nation has the opportunity to select these leaders?

²² While the Great Commission to the church directs going into all the world and preaching the gospel, it also directs "teaching to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Mt. 28:18-20).

Every soul is to be subject to the higher powers: all lawful government is to be obeyed²³ (Dt. 17:8-13; Rom. 13:1-5; I Pet. 2:11-17). Other state obligations include praying for those in authority (I Tim. 2:1,2); not despising or speaking evil of magistrates (II Pet. 2:10); paying taxes (Rom. 13:6,7); knowing and using civil responsibilities and rights (Acts 22:25-29); maintaining civil righteousness (“law and order”) in all areas of influence (Pro. 29:2)²⁴; and, in general, rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God, the things that are God’s (Rom. 13:7).

Citizens promote corporate righteousness in their civil government through praying (I Tim. 2:1,2); educating (Neh. 5:1ff); preaching (Acts 9:15);²⁵ petitioning (Est. 7:3); electing (Pro. 29:52); negotiating (Dan. 2:8-16); appealing (Acts 25:22); legislating (Est. 8:10,11); and, litigating (Acts 25:10-12,16).

B. response to unrighteous governance

Where unrighteous civil situations persist, the godly have the following recourses: fleeing (Mt. 10:23); suffering the consequences of disobedience (Dan. 3:17,18); or, under special conditions (Pro. 24:21), active removal of unlawful governments (Jdgs. 5:6-13, v. 8 “gods” equals “magistrates”).^{26,27}

C. strategy

Strategy is to be employed in civil government participation (Josh. 8:1-22; Neh. 2:5-20; Pro. 20:18; 24:5,6; Ec. 9:13-18; Lk. 14:31). Fundamental civil government (political) strategies in maintaining and promoting righteous governance include being present and staying informed (I Chron. 12:32), persistence (Pro. 25:15; Lk. 18:28),^{28,29} and eternal vigilance (Neh. 4:9; Mt. 13:25). Since knowing the truth is the basis of freedom, vigilance in teaching and remembering the basis of freedom are indispensable in maintaining civil freedom (righteous governance)(Ps. 78:1-11).

²³ The reconciling-all-the-issues word in this sentence is “higher.” Authority always is to be obeyed, but sometimes “authorities” conflict, and a determination must be made as to which is higher. “Judgment calls” (versus unscriptural commands) by authorities are to be obeyed (Pro. 16:10).

²⁴ “Let not your children curse you for giving up those rights and prostrating those institutions which your fathers delivered to you” (Mathias Burnett, Congregational Pastor). David alone was punished for his secret sins involving Bathsheba, while the whole nation was punished for his public sin of numbering the people. The nation did not rise to an insistent “point of order,” although Joab certainly made at least some attempt to stop David (II Sam. 12:10-14; 24:10-17; also, Num. 25:7,8,11).

²⁵ Preaching by the man of God to the magistrate is emphasized in scripture and is preeminently important. Magistrates should listen to preachers of truth (Gen. 41:37; I Ki. 18:1ff; II K. 19:5; 22:13,14; II Chron. 12:5,6; 15:8; 18:4-27; 20:14-18; Jer. 1:5,10; Dan. 4:19; Am. 7:10-17; Hag. 1:12-14; Mt. 2:4; Lk. 3:19; Jn. 18:38 with Mt. 28:19,20; Acts 26:27-29; 27:9,10,21-35; Rev. 10:11).

²⁶ It is appropriate to flee from or thwart unlawful civil government actions, but the citizen is to submit to lawful civil government actions of that same civil government he is otherwise resisting (I Sam. 22:2,14; Dan. 3:16-18, 26). David’s being told to go up into the cities of Judah was a divinely-ordered “revolution” (II Sam. 2:1,8; 3:1). Revolutions generally are wrong (II Sam. 15:4; Pro. 24:21 – “change”: “overthrowing government”). Romans 13:3 reads, “*For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same,*” yet, the very next sentence reveals that these “rulers are not a terror to good works” (Rom. 13:3), indicating a distinction in our relationships to lawful and unlawful governments. I Peter 2:13,14 follows the same pattern.

²⁷ Some determination must be made regarding “might makes right.” Is an obedient Christian immediately to be loyal to a new government which has just overthrown the old (II Sam. 16-18)?! Does a Christian distinguish between de facto and de jure governments? The resolution of this dilemma seems to be in doing what you can (Ex. 4:2; I Cor. 7:21) without neglecting priorities: use whatever influence you have to promote God’s ways. While governments “should not be changed for light and transient causes,” when any government becomes destructive of God-ordered ways, “it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security” (Declaration of Independence).

²⁸ “Incrementalism” has biblical precedent and is not necessarily compromising (Ex. 23:29; Dt. 7:22; Pro. 25:15; Ec. 10:4).

²⁹ A good leader does not forget politically (Dt. 25:19; Jdgs. 8:7,15; I Sam. 15:2).

D. political alliances

There is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few (I Sam. 14:6): God does not need large numbers of people to win political battles (Jdgs. 7:2; Ec. 9:16-18; Is. 30:1-3), and commonly uses small numbers (Dan. 3:17,18,28,29).³⁰ Political alliances can be good (Gen. 21:22-34) or bad (I Ki. 3:1; 15:18-20; II Chron. 19:2; Is. 8:9-13), depending on alignment with evil or good.

³⁰ “It does not take a majority to prevail...but rather an irate, tireless minority, keen on setting brushfires of freedom in the minds of men.”
Samuel Adams

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