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Mind Games Survival Course Manual



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A Christian View of Politics, Government, and Social Action

Kerby Anderson

Introduction

In the last two decades, evangelical Christians have become more involved in government and social action. In the nineteenth century, Christians were involved in a vast array of social concerns, but the rise of the social gospel among ecumenical denominations turned evangelicals away from social involvement. With renewed evangelical activity in the 1980s and 1990s, Christians need to think biblically about politics, government, and social action.

I. Christian view of government

A. Some basic questions

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 time to consider its basic function. What is a biblical view of government? Why do we have government? What kind of government does the Bible allow? Are Christians to be involved in the political process? These are just a few questions we will address in this essay.

2. The Bible and government

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 us with some latitude for these institutions to reflect the needs and demands of particular cultural situations. Because of this ambiguity, Christians often hold different views on particular political issues because the Bible does not speak directly to every area of political discussion. However, Christians are not free to believe whatever we want. Christians should not abandon the Bible when we begin to think about these issues because there is a great deal of biblical material which can be used to judge particular political options.

In the Old Testament, we have clear guidelines for the development of a theocracy in which God is head of government. But these guidelines were written for particular circumstances involving a covenant people who were established by God. These guidelines do not completely apply today because our modern governments are not the direct inheritors of the promises God made to the nation of Israel.

Apart from that unique situation, the Bible does not propose nor endorse any specific political system. The Bible, however, does provide a basis for evaluating various political philosophies because it clearly delineates a view of human nature. Every political theory rests upon a particular view of human nature. British historian, Hugh Revor-Roper, once remarked that a "political theory which does not start from a theory of man is in my view quite worthless." {1}

It is impossible to think about government without thinking about human nature. Christians, therefore, have a basis for rejecting those political philosophies which start with and embrace an incorrect view of human nature. Due to this revelation, Christians have a mandate to construct a workable government system with a realistic view of human nature.

2. Government and human nature

The Bible describes two different elements of human nature. This viewpoint is helpful in judging government systems. Because we are created in the image of God (Genesis 1), we are able to exercise such noble human traits as courage, judgment, compassion, and rationality. However, we are also fallen creatures (Genesis 3). This human sinfulness (Romans 3:23) has therefore created a need to control evil and sinful human behavior through civil government.

A. *Government is a fundamental need*

1. It is basic to human nature.

Many theologians have suggested that the only reason we have government today is to control sinful behavior due to 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). The Bible also speaks of the angelic host as being organized into levels of authority and function.

In the creation, God ordained government as the means by which human beings and angelic hosts are ruled. The rest of the created order is governed by instinct (Proverbs 30:24-28) and God's providence. Insect colonies, for example, may show a level of order, but this is due merely to genetically controlled instinct.

Human beings, on the other hand, are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and thus responsible to the volitional commands of God. We are created by a God of order (1 Corinthians 14:33), therefore we also seek order through governmental structures.

2. Civil government is rooted in human responsibility.

If we survey various political theories, we find that a Christian view of government is quite different than that proposed by many political theorists. The basis for civil government is rooted in our created nature. We are rational and volitional beings. We are not determined by fate as the Greeks would say, nor are we determined by our environment as modern behaviorists would say. We have the power of choice. Because we have the power of choice, we can exercise delegated power over the created order. Thus, a biblical view of human nature requires a governmental system which acknowledges human responsibility.

3. Civil government is necessary because of human sinfulness.

While the source of civil government is rooted in human responsibility, the need for government derives from the need to control human sinfulness. God ordained civil government to restrain evil (cf. Genesis 9). We cannot consider anarchy as a viable option because all have sinned (Romans 3:23) and are in need of external control.

2. *Christianity and political philosophy*

Notice how a Christian view of human nature gives us a basis by which to judge political philosophies. For example, Christians must reject political philosophies which ignore human sinfulness. Many utopian political theories are guilty of this. Plato postulated in *The Republic* that the ideal government would be one in which enlightened philosopher-kings would lead the country. The Bible, however, teaches that all are sinful (Romans 3:23); therefore, Plato's proposed leaders would also be affected by the sinful effects of the Fall (Genesis 3). They would lack the benevolent and enlightened disposition necessary for Plato's republic to work.

Another example is the Marxist scheme of government. Karl Marx had a naive view of human nature.^{2} He felt that society, and in particular, the capitalistic economy, was the reason for human failing. His solution was to overthrow the capitalistic economy and replace it with a communistic society in which human potential would be liberated. He located the problem in an economic system and believed that the solution would emerge by the destruction of capitalism. Marx felt that people are only the innocent victims of this menace.

Christians should reject the utopian vision of Marxism. Although the Bible does talk of believers becoming new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17) through spiritual conversion, even in this case, the effects of sin are not completely overcome in this life. The new birth is just the beginning of the growth process that continues throughout our earthly existence. Furthermore, the Bible teaches that we will always live in a world tainted by sin. Karl Marx's view of the New Man in a New Society therefore contradicts biblical teaching because it teaches human perfectibility on earth by man's own efforts.

3. *Government requires a balanced view of human nature*

A Christian view of government is based upon a balanced view of human nature. It recognizes both human dignity (we are created in God's image) and human depravity (we are sinful individuals). Because both grace and sin operate in government, we should neither be too optimistic nor too pessimistic. We should view governmental affairs with a deep sense of biblical realism.

Most political theorists in Britain and the United States accepted this balanced view of human nature. Edmund Burke, an English Christian, developed his description of what government should be in his *Reflections on the French Revolution* based upon a balanced view of human nature. So did the founders of the American form of government. Even though many were not Christians, they were frequently influenced by the Christian milieu.

James Madison believed in this balanced view of human nature. He asked the following question in the *Federalist Papers*:

But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.{3}

Framing a republic requires a balance of power that liberates human dignity and rationality and controls human sin and depravity.

As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature, which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence. Republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form.{4}

This does not mean that Christians must support every aspect of the American governmental system. The Constitution represents a compromise of Christian principles and humanistic principles from the Enlightenment. And evangelicals have often been guilty of substituting a civil religion for biblical principles. The American political experiment has nevertheless been successful because it is based upon a balanced view of human nature which avoids the dangers of utopian experiments in human government.



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