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Mind Games Survival Course Manual



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A Christian View of Politics, Government, and Social Action

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III. Civil government

A. *Civil government is necessary and divinely ordained by God (Romans 13:1-7).*

Government 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).

2. *As citizens, we have been given a number of responsibilities.* We are called to render service and obedience to the government (Matthew 22:21). Because it is a God-ordained institution, we are to submit to civil authority (1 Peter 2:13-17) as we would to other institutions of God. But we are not to give total and final allegiance to the secular state. Other God-ordained institutions exist in society alongside the state. Our final allegiance must be to God. We are to obey civil authorities (Romans 13:5) in order to avoid anarchy and chaos, but there may be times when we may be called to exercise civil disobedience.
3. *We find a number of examples of civil disobedience in the Old Testament.*

For example, God ordered Samuel to deceive King Saul (1 Samuel 16). Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego defied the order of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 3). In the New Testament, we find the apostles preaching even when they were commanded to be silent. In situations when a major conflict arises between biblical absolutes and governmental policy, we are to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). However, in many cases, we may be able to find a creative alternative which avoids a conflict and allows us to be obedient to the Lord and the government (Daniel 1).

4. *We should be involved in government*

Many Christians have mistakenly felt that since government is made up of fallen individuals, we are to only give it limited involvement. Yet we must recognize that government is part of the creation order. It, like other institutions, has fallen into sin, but that does not limit our involvement with it. We are to be salt and light (Matthew 5) in the midst of the political context.

Although governments may be guilty of injustice, we should not stop working for justice or cease being 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.

5. *Interest groups can have a negative effect on government.*

One of the greatest flaws with the American form of government is the tendency to assume that the public good is the sum total of all special interests. In this regard, we have been excessively influenced by utilitarianism. We have focused too much on pragmatic policies and questions of majority rule and not enough on public justice.

Interest-group politics dominates the political landscape. Each special group of individuals in society has a desire to see its competitive interests represented in public policy. As a result, interest-group politics often predominate over the just and moral action that should be taken. Rather than consider the normative (what should be done), we frequently focus on the strategic (what can be done with the political forces involved). We focus too much on the form of government rather than on the moral content of policy. We should be more concerned with justice than with satisfying public interests.

6. *A Christian view of government should also be concerned with human rights.*

Human rights in a Christian system are based upon 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 Declaration of Independence captures this idea by stating that government is based upon the inalienable rights of individuals. Government based upon a humanistic view of government, however, does 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 are articulated in terms of what the government is forbidden to do. But in totalitarian governments, the rights of citizens are spelled out. In essence, a republic limits government, while a totalitarian government limits citizens.

7. *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. By doing this, we can protect 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. Our experience in 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. But notice the dangers that ensued when power was transferred to a single king. Even David, a man after God's own heart, abused his power and Israel experienced great calamity (2 Samuel 11-24).

Abuse and misuse of power characterizes human governments. The contribution of modern democratic theory was to recognize human sinfulness and to devise an ingenious method to tame its effects. Madison and others recognized that since you could not rid human nature of sinful behavior (which Madison called passions), the only solution was to use human nature to control itself.

Again, we can see the genius of the American system. Madison and others realized the futility of trying to remove passions (human sinfulness) from the population. Therefore, he proposed that human nature be set against human nature. This was done by separating various institutional power structures. First, the church was separated from the state so that ecclesiastical functions and governmental functions would not interfere with religious and political liberty. Second, the federal government was delegated certain powers while the rest of the powers resided in the state governments. Third, the federal government was divided into three equal branches: executive, legislative, and judicial.

Each branch was given separate but rival powers, thus preventing the possibility of concentrating power into the hands of a few. Each branch had certain checks over the other branches so that there was a distribution and balance of power. In addition to this, the people were given certain means of redress. Elections and an amendment process have kept power from being concentrated in the hands of governmental officials. Each of these checks was motivated by a healthy fear of human nature. The founders believed in human responsibility and human dignity, but they did not trust human nature too much. Their solution was to separate powers and invest each branch with rival powers.

The effect of this system was to allow ambition and power to control itself. Each branch is given power, and as ambitious men and women seek to extend their sphere of influence, they provide a check on the other branch. This is what has often been referred to as the concept of "countervailing ambitions."

For example, the executive branch cannot take over the government and rule at its whim because the legislative branch has been given the power of the purse. Congress can approve or disapprove budgets for governmental

programs. A President cannot wage war if the Congress does not appropriate money for its execution.

Similarly, the legislative branch is also controlled by this structure of government. It can pass legislation, but it always faces the threat of presidential veto and judicial oversight. Since the executive branch is responsible for the execution of legislation, the legislature cannot exercise complete control over the government. Undergirding all of this is the authority of the ballot box.

Modern democratic systems (whether the American form of government or the British form of parliamentary rule) function well because they protect liberty and allow the greatest amount of political participation. A benevolent dictator might be more efficient, but would probably be less objective and less keen at adjudicating rival interests. Each of us has biases, and the potential for being corrupted by power is very great in a dictatorship. But the greatest fear would be that a benevolent dictator might be replaced by a malevolent one. A modern democratic government prevents the unleashing of human sinfulness which might occur through concentrations of power. Democracy is a system in which "bad men can do least harm, and good men have the freedom to do good works." Unlike other political systems, it takes human sinfulness seriously and thus protects its citizens from major abuses of power.

4. Governmental authority

A. *Human governmental authority is limited*

One of the most perplexing problems in government today is determining the limits of governmental authority. With the remarkable growth in the size and scope of government in this century, it is necessary for us to clearly define the lines of governmental authority.

At the outset, we must acknowledge that it is often difficult to set limits or draw lines. The Old Testament theocracy was very different from our modern democratic government. Although human nature is the same, drawing biblical principles from an agrarian, monolithic culture and applying them to the technological, pluralistic culture requires discernment.

Part of this difficulty can be eased by separating two issues. First, should government legislate morality? We will discuss this in the section of this essay on social action. Second, what are the limits of governmental sovereignty? The following are a few general principles which can be helpful in determining the limits of governmental authority.

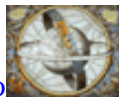
2. *There are other institutions besides government.*

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

1. The first institution is the church (1 Peter 2:9-10, Hebrews 12:18-24). In the New Testament, Jesus taught that the government should work in harmony with the church and recognize its sovereignty in spiritual matters (Matthew 22:21).
2. The second institution is the family (Ephesians 5:22-32, 1 Peter 3:1-7). The family is an institution under God and under His authority (Genesis 1:26-28, 2:20-25). When the family breaks down, the government often has to step in to protect the rights of the wife (wife abuse) or children (child abuse, adoption). The biblical emphasis, however, is not so much on rights as it is on responsibilities and mutual submission (Ephesians 5).
3. 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 (Deut. 4:9) and may entrust them to tutors (Galatians 4:2).
4. In a humanistic system of government, the institutions of church and family are usually subordinated to the state. In this atheistic system, 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 governmental intervention into the areas of church and family.
5. 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 threat to life, liberty, or property. Otherwise, civil government should recognize the other sovereignty of the other spheres of God-ordained institutions.

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