



GOVERNMENT: SMALL OR LARGE?

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The debate about the size and role of government has huge implications for the lives of individuals all over the world. Important as the issue is, Christians are divided about what Scripture has to say about government. Some argue that the Bible teaches limited government.¹ Others maintain that the Bible teaches Marxism or socialism, or at least is consistent with big government of some sort.² What are some considerations that can help us frame this debate and work towards a conclusion? The Bible sets out four principles that can provide a foundation for the discussion.

1. GOVERNMENT IS ESTABLISHED BY GOD

Romans 13:1-7 is the *locus classicus* on the topic of government. E. F. Harrison calls it “the most notable passage in the New Testament on Christian civic responsibility.”³ Verse 1 says that “there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God.” This is a strong endorsement of the intrinsic goodness of government, in its proper role. This endorsement is reinforced in verse 4: “for [the authority] is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.” Verse 6 calls rulers “servants of God.”

John Murray says, “This designation removes every supposition to the effect that magistracy is per se evil and serves good only in the sense that as a lesser evil it restrains and counteracts greater evils.”⁴

This, of course, does not mean that all government actions are right. Note that the term used in verses 1 and 5 is “subjection,” not “obey.” Harrison comments:

*What he requires is submission, a term that calls for placing one’s self under someone else. Here and in verse 5 he seems to avoid using the stronger word “obey,” and the reason is that the believer may find it impossible to comply with every demand of government. A circumstance may arise in which he must choose between obeying God and obeying men (Acts 5:29). But even then he must be submissive to the extent that if his Christian convictions do not permit his compliance, he will accept the consequences of his refusal.*⁵

If the government forbids what God commands—such as prayer in Daniel 6—or commands what God forbids—such as idolatry in Daniel 3—then the believer must disobey human authority, and pay the consequences.⁶

2. GOVERNMENT’S ROLE IS MORE NEGATIVE THAN POSITIVE

In its proper role, government punishes or exercises vengeance on the evildoer, according to several passages in the New Testament. Paul’s description of government in Romans 13:4 stands in contrast to the believer’s personal response to evil in the passage immediately preceding. Romans 12:17 commands believers to “never...pay back evil for evil,” and verse 19 says, “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay says the Lord.’” Individuals are not to avenge themselves but turn the task of vengeance over to God. We are to “overcome evil with good,” and to do good to our enemies—giving them food or drink when necessary.⁷ This passage echoes the Sermon on the Mount—“Love your enemies.”⁸ God is not ignoring or forgetting the injustice. Rather, he will exercise vengeance in his own time as well as use the government to do his task. John Murray comments, “Thus the magistrate is the avenger in executing the judgment that accrues to the evildoer from the wrath of God.”⁹ God has appointed government as one of his instruments of justice.

To borrow a term from political theory, the government which punishes evil in Romans 13:4 is playing a “negative” role. Government plays a “negative” role when it protects a citizen in his or her own pursuit of something legitimate; by punishing evil, the government plays a negative role, because it is protecting a citizen’s own pursuit of private property, health, and life. In contrast, government plays a positive role when it directly provides something to its citizens—like healthcare, food stamps, or low-interest student loans.

The latter part of Romans 13:4 emphasizes government’s negative role: “It is a minister of God,” bearing the sword—the power to coerce or kill—“an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.” Verse 3 says, “Do what is good and you will have praise from the same [authority].” Note that government is not called in this passage to do the good—or play a positive role by creating rights, goods, or services—but to give praise to those who do good. This praise could involve giving special recognition to those who are serving in exemplary ways or just acknowledgment, official or otherwise, for being a good citizen.

Murray says, “The praise could be expressed by saying that good behavior secures good standing in the state, a status to be cherished and cultivated.”¹⁰ This passage does not prohibit government from providing goods and services but strongly puts the emphasis on upholding rule of law and encouraging good behavior. This passage alone certainly would not give warrant to those who want a big government.

Similarly, 1 Peter 2:13-14 says, “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution; whether to a king or one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.” Note again that this summary of government’s role gives primacy to the rule of law, or punishing evil. It is also to give praise to those who do right, rather than doing the good itself. The accent is on government’s negative role, not on a positive role of doing good deeds or providing for people.

Jesus rejected the political pathway to inaugurate his coming kingdom, and today’s Christians should as well. He said that his “kingdom is not of this world.”¹¹ Jesus acknowledged Caesar’s place (“give to Caesar what is Caesar’s”) and God’s place (“give to God what is God’s”).¹² Tim Keller says the following on these words of Jesus:

This was the very first theory of limited government in the history of the world... Give Caesar the money because it’s his money—he printed it—but don’t give him the allegiance... What Jesus Christ is saying is that you may give Caesar some of what he wants, which is his money, but you cannot give Caesar ultimately what he wants, which is to completely accept his system of coercion, his system of injustice, his system of exclusion—he wants ultimate allegiance, he wants no one to sit in judgment on him, but we can’t give him that.¹³

When standing before Pilate, Jesus acknowledged Pilate’s authority over him, but said, “You would have no authority over Me, unless it has been given you from above.”¹⁴ Perhaps this is the root from which Paul developed his teaching in Romans 13.

Another indicative passage is 1 Timothy 2:1-2: “I urge that prayers...be made...for kings and all who are in authority in order that they may live a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.” Note that the prayers are for the authorities—secular kings—to provide a rule of law so that there might be safety and security. J.P. Moreland says this passage calls for prayers to “sustain stable social order in which people can live peacefully and quietly without fear of harm.”¹⁵ The prayer does not include petitions that the king redistribute wealth to people.

The above passages are so important because they set forth the New Testament perspective towards secular government. The Old Testament had established a theocracy where Israelite kings were expected to adhere to the Old Testament law. Today, however, most people live in societies more similar to the pagan nations found Amos 1 and 2, rather than to Israel. Moreland argues that the biblical laws for Israel are more applicable to the modern day Church than the secular government. He points out,

The prophet chastises these [pagan] nations and rulers for violating people’s negative rights, e.g., for forced deportation of a population, torturing and killing pregnant women, stealing, forced slavery, and murder. There is no expectation in the passage that the nations and rulers were to provide positive rights for people. This is typical of the prophets and their understanding of the responsibilities of pagan rulers and nations.¹⁶

3. LIMITED GOVERNMENT SUITS A FALLEN PEOPLE

Thomas Aquinas in his book, *On Kingship*, argues that the best government would be monarchy, provided that the king was good and righteous. However, he also acknowledges that monarchy could be the worst of all governments, if it led to tyranny.¹⁷ Lord Acton famously said that, “Power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely.”¹⁸ The reason this is true is because of the Fall. Novelist, literary critic, and theologian Charles Williams described the ambivalence of life after the Fall as “This is Thou” and “This is not Thou.” With respect to every good thing, there is the divinely intended use for every good thing (“This is Thou”), but also divinely prohibited abuse of God’s good creation (“This is not Thou”).

Government is good but can easily be abused. The more power placed in the hands of an individual, or a ruling elite, or large government, the greater the danger of this kind of corruption. A glance at the news reveals that this abuse of power prevents many countries from growing or progressing in profitable ways. This should not surprise believers as they should expect this corruption given our present sinful condition. Unless government is limited in its structure with checks and balances, or by prophetic critique, as in the case of Elijah to Ahab in 1 Kings 18, or by the people in a democratic process, it will tend to lean towards corruption. Unless government is held accountable, there is entropy that leads towards tyranny.

The United States government is built on a system of checks and balances. For any given law, the Senate can trump the House of Representatives or vice versa, stopping a bill that has been passed by the other body. The President can veto what the House and Senate pass. The Supreme Court can strike down a law that goes through all these channels. The Constitution is, in principle, the basis on which every law is to be judged. We all know how imperfect this system is, but it does make it more difficult for any law—whether bad or good—to be passed. Of course, this system does not prevent the passage of bad laws. But it does, at least in theory, limit each branch of government. Again, one of the reasons that the Founders put a system of checks and balances in place was because they understood our fallen nature. The Fall has resulted in sinful man’s tendency to abuse power, as articulated by Lord Acton. Winston Churchill is famous for saying, “Democracy is the worst of all governments, except for all those others that have been tried.”¹⁹ The more concentrated the power entrusted to the government, the greater the danger of abuse.

4. BIBLICAL WARNINGS ABOUT GOVERNMENT

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is full of examples and warnings of abusive government. In Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, this is evident in Egypt where the Pharaoh initially resists Moses’ plea to “let my people go.”²⁰ We see in Pharaoh a hard-hearted totalitarian tyrant resistant to submit even after several plagues show God’s power. Passover is a celebration that commemorates prophetic resistance to a totalitarian dictator and God’s powerful deliverance of his people from slavery.²¹ It is a defining moment in the Old Testament.

At times, people longed for a king. After Gideon's victory, the Israelites wanted to make him king and set up a dynasty so that his sons would continue the rule. But Gideon said, "I will not rule over you, nor my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you."²² Later when Samuel's sons, his successors, became corrupt and resorted to taking bribes from the people, the Israelites again cried out for a king to judge them and defend them against warring nations. They wanted a king "like all the nations."²³ God told Samuel to listen to the people even though it meant a rejection of God's kingship. Bill Arnold, in his commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel, argues that the Israelite demand for a king was "sinful in its motive, selfish in its timing, and cowardly in its spirit."²⁴ The Israelites were seeking conformity and security. What they failed to see was that unchecked kings would "become militaristic, conscript Israelite men, confiscate property, and lead ultimately to enslavement."²⁵

Samuel told the people that kings would "take" their sons for their armies, "take" their daughters for cooks and bakers, "take" the best of their fields, "take" a tenth of their seed and their vineyards, "take" their best young men, "take" a tenth of their flock. Eventually, he warned, "you yourselves will become his servants."²⁶ Samuel predicted that the king would take so much that "you will cry out in that day because of the king whom you have chosen for yourselves."²⁷ Arnold sums up this passage as follows: "The theme words of Samuel's warnings are 'take' and 'serve'...Nothing seems beyond the grasp of the king, whether children, personal property, or one's freedom. Kings take and take and when everything is gone they force you to serve. The final indignation: 'you yourselves will become his slaves.'"²⁸

The history of kings in the Old Testament reveals that most were, in fact, "takers." Even Solomon, who started so well "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and did not follow the Lord fully."²⁹ He did not listen to the Deuteronomic warning to future kings: "He shall not multiply horses for himself...neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself."³⁰ Yet Solomon did all these things, even establishing centers for idolatrous worship for his foreign wives. A proverb ascribed to Solomon says, "Cease listening, my son, to discipline, and you will stray from the words of knowledge."³¹ He started well but failed to remember his own advice.

Solomon also heavily taxed the people. After Solomon's death, his son, Rehoboam, rose to power. The elders of Israel came to Rehoboam and pleaded that he might "lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke which he put on us."³² The king rejected the advice of his elders that he should listen to the people and took the advice of young friends who grew up with him. He responded to the elders of Israel, saying, "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions."³³ This misjudgment led to the division of the kingdom and a rejection of Rehoboam's authority. Rehoboam refused to limit his power and greatly miscalculated, losing about half his kingdom.

Although kingship is not intrinsically bad, the history of this type of government reflects the Fall and the truth of Lord Acton's proverb. Time after time, governments in the Old Testament exceeded their bounds, clearly reflecting the need for government to be limited. The examples of Pharaoh, Samuel's warning about the dangers of kingship, Solomon's excess, and Rehoboam's folly are just a few examples from the Old Testament demonstrating the need for government to respect limits to its power. Many more examples exist.³⁴ Perhaps the most dramatic usurpation of power occurs in Revelation 13:1-10. In this vision, John sees a beast rising out of the sea and gaining great power and authority.³⁵ One leader, seemingly resurrected from the dead, speaks "arrogant words."³⁶ He attacks believers and gains authority over "every tribe and people and tongue and nation."³⁷ All except true believers worship him.³⁸ Leon Morris says, "Hendriksen

sees the beast as signifying worldly government directed against the Church and he takes to a multiplicity of heads to indicate that this has various forms as Babylon, Assyria, Rome, etc.”³⁹

Some commentators think that the beast is Rome. It may be, but it also signifies more than Rome, perhaps pointing to the future. Robert Mounce comments, “The worship of the satanically-inspired perversion of secular authority is the ultimate offense against the one true God. The temptation rejected by Jesus at the outset of his public ministry reappears at the end of history in its most persuasive form and gains the allegiance of all but the elect.”⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

God has clearly approved of government as an authority. Due to fallen human nature, God chooses to use government as a tool in order to uphold order, justice, and the rule of law. Thus, believers are to respect and pray for their leaders while submitting themselves to the authority provided by the government. Yet government itself is composed of fallen individuals and is far from perfect. As a result, Scripture also makes clear that God has also placed limits and expectations on the government. In the Old Testament, for instance, Israelite kings were expected to obey God’s laws as written in the Pentateuch.

Now that most governments are not theocratic but secular, Christians must concern themselves with where they can have influence to make sure that government does not grow beyond its bounds. The Bible provides many examples of government that grows to become oppressive, and Christians must be vigilant lest those in authority take, take, and take ever more. According to Romans 13:7, it is certainly right to pay taxes. Yet in the words of John Calvin, rulers “should remember that all they receive from people is public property, and not a means of satisfying private lust and luxury.”⁴¹

Perhaps the whole debate on limited government is between Romans 13 and Revelation 13. In Romans, we see the negative role of government to stop evil by upholding the rule of law. In Revelation, we see government taking over all, including worship. The Bible repeatedly provides examples of governments which became corrupt and usurped freedom, property, and money. In addition, these and many governments today are highly bureaucratic, impersonal, inefficient, and often not grounded on biblical principles. The larger they become, the more resources they require from their citizens. These considerations might lead many to question whether government should play a positive role in providing goods and services. It might be helpful to first ask whether churches, nonprofits, private enterprise, and other non-government institutions could provide these goods and services more efficiently, economically, and wisely.

These arguments point to a need for limited government. But the question remains, how limited? If Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-14 are to be our guide—government should be limited to the negative—punishing evil. It is important to remember that just because Scripture does not command a government to play a positive role, it does not forbid it either. However, in light of the considerations discussed above, the

burden of proof lies with those that advocate that government expand its power, since this involves relying so extensively upon the resources of others.

Ultimately, when coming to a conclusion about the size and scope of government, Christians must carefully assess the consequences of their choices, listening to biblical warnings, pondering the pervasiveness of the Fall, and learning from the lessons of history.⁴²

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¹J.P. Moreland, "A Biblical Case for Limited Government," Institute for Faith, Work, and Economics, accessed July 26, 2013, <http://tifwe.org/research/a-biblical-case-for-limited-government/>.

²Art Lindsley, "Does Acts 2-5 Teach Socialism?" Institute for Faith, Work & Economics, accessed July 26, 2013, <http://tifwe.org/research/does-acts-2-5-teach-socialism/>.

³E. F. Harrison, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 136.

⁴John Murray, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 152.

⁵Harrison, 136-7.

⁶There is even a place for just revolution in extreme circumstances. See John Jefferson Davis's book *Evangelical Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2004), chapter 10, for a good treatment of this issue.

⁷Rom. 12:20-21.

⁸Matt. 5:44.

⁹Murray, 153.

¹⁰Murray, 151.

¹¹John 18:36.

¹²Matt. 22:20-22.

¹³Timothy Keller, "Arguing about Politics" (sermon, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, July 15, 2001), <http://sermons2.redeemer.com/sermons/arguing-about-politics>.

¹⁴John 19:11.

¹⁵Moreland, "A Biblical Case for Limited Government."

¹⁶Moreland, "A Biblical Case for Limited Government."

¹⁷Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship*, trans. Gerland Phelan, ed. I. Th. Eschmann (1267, repr., Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1949). See chapters three and four.

¹⁸John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton to Mandell Creighton, 5 April 1887, in *Historical Essays and Studies*, ed. John Figgis and Reginald Laurence (London: Macmillan, 1907), appendix.

¹⁹ Winston Churchill, 11 November 1947, in *The Official Report, House of Commons (5th Series)*, vol. 444, 206-7.

²⁰ Ex. 9.

²¹ Ex. 12.

²² Judges 8:23.

²³ 1 Sam. 8:5.

²⁴ Bill Arnold, *The NIVA Application Commentary: I and II Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 149.

²⁵ Arnold, 151.

²⁶ 1 Sam. 8:10-17.

²⁷ 1 Sam. 8:18.

²⁸ Arnold, 151.

²⁹ 1 Sam. 11:6.

³⁰ Deut. 17:16-17.

³¹ Prov. 19:27.

³² 1 Kings 12:4.

³³ 1 Kings 12:14.

³⁴ Tom Pratt, "God and Government: A Biblical Perspective," The Institute for Faith, Work & Economics, accessed July 26, 2013, <http://tifwe.org/research/god-and-government-a-biblical-perspective-the-bible-and-limited-government/>.

³⁵ Rev. 13:2.

³⁶ Rev. 13:5.

³⁷ Rev. 13:7.

³⁸ Rev. 13:8.

³⁹ Leon Morris, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 161.

⁴⁰ Matt. 4:8-10; Robert Mounce, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 255.

⁴¹ John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries: Romans and Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 284.

⁴² For an in-depth discussion about these "lessons of history," see Chad Brand's "A Case for Limited Government, Institute for Faith, Work & Economics, accessed July 26, 2013, <http://tifwe.org/research/limited-government-2/>.