The Nature and Role of Government in the Bible

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AMBIVALENT ABOUT GOVERNMENT

The Bible is profoundly ambivalent about government. In what must be the best-known passage on the subject, Jesus is asked whether it is right to pay taxes to Caesar or not.[i] Having drawn attention to Caesar's image on a denarius, he replies, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.' A brilliantly enigmatic reply to a vicious question, but what exactly does it mean?

A popular interpretation would have Jesus dividing the world up into a religious domain and a domain of government, with the political consequence that we should obey government in temporal affairs and God in spiritual ones. But Jesus cannot have meant this. He knew that 'the earth is the Lord's and everything in it.'[ii] God cannot be parallel to Caesar, he is far above him! He is clearly being subversive at the same time as being respectful. But how subversive and how respectful?

This ambivalence about government is reflected repeatedly throughout the Bible. When Israel asked for a king they were rejecting God's rule and choosing oppression,[iii] yet David was a king after God's own heart, whose throne would be established for ever.[iv] The prophet Hosea critiques of the kings of Israel but offers glimpses of reunification under a second David figure.[v] St Paul is proud of his citizenship and uses it to good effect,[vi] but understands the dark side of political authority, being left in prison as a favour to his enemies.[vii]

The Bible's ambivalence about government corresponds to our own experience. The biblical writers would have been astonished by the modern state. In its power, its competence, its efficiency and its rationality it far surpasses any ancient empire or kingdom. The contribution of the modern state to human well-being is phenomenal.

Yet at the same time, that power of technological and administrative efficiency has been put to the systematic torture and annihilation of millions upon millions, not only in the gas chamber of the 'Final Solution' and the prison camps of the Gulag, but in many states across the globe, to this very day. Perhaps more insidiously and closer to home, the modern regulatory state extends its mentality of discipline and order into almost every aspect of human existence. We are governed as never before. In terms of political principle, the Bible's response to its own, and our own, ambivalence about government, is to insist that government is both legitimate and limited.

GOVERNMENT: LEGITIMATE AND LIMITED

The Old Testament writers were convinced that the Lord, the God who had created the heavens and the earth, and who had made himself known to Israel, was supreme over all nations and all 'gods'.[viii] The psalmist recognised that God's Messiah, the anointed King of David's line, would exercise God's universal rule over the nations in person. Against all political opposition, 'the One enthroned in heaven laughs…"I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill."'[ix] Jesus came, claiming to be that Messiah, God's King coming into

his kingdom. The apostles were gripped with the reality of Jesus' complete authority,[x] as they proclaimed him both Lord and Christ (Messiah).[xi] They were easily understood to be claiming in Jesus a direct political rival to Caesar.[xii]

It is against this background that we must place two key passages in the New Testament on government. 1 Peter 2:13-17 follows immediately after the assertion of the new nationhood of the people of God, and its language so closely parallels that of Romans 13:1-7 that both passages may well reflect a common source in the teaching of Jesus. It is certainly of a piece with that teaching. The authority of government is legitimate, established by God, so one should submit to it. Governments exist to restrain evil by punishing the wrongdoer, and to promote good by commending those who do right. Governing is a work of God, and those who do the work of God are entitled to the support of his people.[xiii]

And yet, if government is legitimate, it is also limited, in two key ways. First, government is limited by the existence of other human authorities, in particular church, family and individual. The visible church in the New Testament is not simply a spiritual or ideological movement of like-minded people. It has an order and a social presence. It appoints to offices, involving teaching and pastoring, but also social welfare.[xiv] It administers sacraments.[xv] It requires some mark of differentiation between those 'inside' and those 'outside'.[xvi] It resolves disputes between its members.[xvii] The authority of the church, administered by its office-holders, is not derived from government but from Christ.[xviii]

Once we have broken out of the pernicious assumption of state sovereignty to see that human authority is always plural, we quickly see that the Bible identifies several parallel authorities under God. The family, founded on the lifelong union of a man and a woman, is presented as the foundational social and political unit.[xix] Its authority, the relationships between husband and wife, parent and child, is not taken away by Christ either.[xx] Nor does it derive from government. Beyond this, one can certainly see that self-government plays a central part in biblical ethics.[xxi]

All this indicates that we should be cautious when talking about 'Government', still less the 'State'. Government, in general, is simply helmsmanship, and one may be steering the ship of state, but one may also be guiding a church, a family, or oneself. Older writers were correct to refer to 'civil government', precisely because there are other forms of government under God. Here, then, is one limit.

Second, government (civil government, of course) is limited by the means at its disposal. The symbolic means of government is the sword; its ultimate sanction is the deprivation of life, liberty or property.[xxii] This radically limits its serviceability to the King who eschewed the use of the sword.[xxiii] It limits it, but it does not render it useless. Nowhere is the collaboration of church and state in the promotion of Christ's rule better captured than in 1 Timothy 2:1-4:

'I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in

all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to acknowledge of the truth.'

With perhaps more than half an eye to the riot in Ephesus,[xxiv] Paul assumes that government is to preserve peace and order, to let the church express through its love for God and neighbour the universal scope of God's desire for the whole world. That is the way 'the State' evangelises.

If government is limited, what, then, are its limits? Scripture leaves this question open, which is one of the reasons why Christians can legitimately disagree about politics. That said, the Bible does offer us wisdom on the ways in which government should be limited, with a particular focus on four key political values – equality, legality, diffusion and accountability – each of which poses to us a serious question.

GOVERNMENT SHOULD REFLECT A COMMITMENT TO HUMAN EQUALITY

The Bible has a rich conception of equal human worth, which is given practical and material significance. This is implicit in the creation narrative, in which all are descendants of one couple.[xxv] We see it in the universality of sin and the universal need of redemption.[xxvi] Jesus' ministry was radically inclusive, extending to rich and poor, men and women, foreigners and fellow-citizens, the socially excluded and the respectable.[xxvii] In him all human hierarchies are overthrown.[xxviii] The story of Israel contains numerous and surprising instances of equality. The land was divided up according to tribes and families to ensure roughly proportionate access to the means of production.[xxix] The Jubilee system periodically reversed the accumulated debt and inequality in favour of the original distribution.[xxx] The law codes were distinguished from other contemporaneous codes of the Ancient Near East by the absence of class-based punishments depending on the status of the parties.

In the early church, Paul was concerned to wean the Thessalonians off their dependence on abusive client- patron relationships, encouraging each to work for themselves, so that they could in turn be generous to those in need.[xxxi] He asked the Corinthians to be more intentional about their financial support for the poverty-stricken church in Jerusalem, contending that there should be the equality of mutual support.[xxxii] The Bible does not make a case for representative democracy, and it certainly would reject any account of 'the sovereignty of the people' (only God is sovereign!). But it does suggest that forms of government which reflect equal citizenship on the part of the government are preferable.

The genius of the Old Testament law was that it simultaneously combined material equality with small government. In so doing, it poses to us the question, how can we pursue a fully-rounded conception of equality without constructing an unlimited State?

GOVERNMENT SHOULD BE SUBJECT TO LAW

The Bible has a remarkably exalted view of law. Law is the way in which God reveals his will. Properly understood, it is the expression of a universal love,[xxxiii] and the exact opposite of sin.[xxxiv] The biblical view of law has a strong subjective dimension, rooting it

in individual knowledge and motivation. The people were to put the law on their hearts, impress it on their children, talk about it at home and abroad.[xxxv] Not only is law to be internalised, it is to be 'done'. The language of walking is frequently used to express the regularity of daily action. 'Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord."[xxxvi]

The Bible does not contain a theory of the Rule of Law, but it does suggest that forms of government which are located within and not above law are preferable. Before we jump too quickly from this to ideas of fundamental human rights, valuable though these are, it is important to recognise how the fundamental law of a nation should be 'internalisable' and liveable – as relevant to my relations with my neighbour as to the constraint of government. In light of this, might there be scope for starting from a statement of truly universal duties, as opposed to rights against the State?

GOVERNMENTAL POWER SHOULD BE DIFFUSE

One of the most sustained aspects of the Bible's teaching about government is its critique of imperialism. Babel is introduced in Genesis 11 as an expression of human rebellion against God.[xxxvii] Babylon is a source of oppression to Israel[xxxviii] and appears again in Revelation as the symbol of the mighty and idolatrous Roman Empire.[xxxix] Human beings are perennially tempted look to concentrations of political power to provide a substitute security and authority found only in God.

Within Israel itself institutional arrangements were diffuse. Although there was a focus for national unity in the centralised cult,[xl] and a rudimentary judicial hierarchy that existed from an early time,[xli] the nation was essentially conceived as a tribal federation, with local law-enforcement and mutual obligations of self-defence. The Bible does not present us with a worked-out theory of the separation of powers, but it does provide us with pointers in that direction. Evil is restrained and individuals flourish when authority is diffused. Are we paying too high a price for the efficiency and equity of modern government in terms of national and international centralisation?

GOVERNMENTS SHOULD BE HELD TO ACCOUNT

The final biblical theme relevant to government is accountability. Each person is accountable to God for things they have done in this life, whether political or personal.[xlii] The judgment of God is envisaged not only at the end of time as the final judgment,[xliii] but also as an ongoing process of God's engagement with the world. Kings and emperors who defy God are brought low: Pharaoh,[xliv] Nebuchadnezzar[xlv] and Herod.[xlvi] Accountability is not simply a feature of our relationship to God. It shapes our human relations as well. In 1 Samuel 12:2-3, the prophet gives an account of his life and work to the people, and the idea of a final account given to others emerges again in Paul's address to the Ephesian elders: 'you know how I lived the whole time I was with you."[xlvii] In political terms it is possible that there was an underlying principle of kingly accountability to the people which explains Saul's fear of David, as well as popular involvement in the accession of kings and the renewal of the covenant.[xlviii]

Systems of accountability always struggle to find the right balance between distance and proximity. Come too close, and you get co-opted; move too far away and you cannot tell what is going on. Politically, we have to settle for a range of institutions, but in each case we can ask: Are they too close? Are they too distant? Do our parliamentary select committees have enough access to departmental information? Are they sufficiently immune from Executive pressure? Can the media find out what is going on? Can they resist co-option into the government's 'communication strategy'?

CONCLUSION: THE BIBLE AND HOW TO VOTE

Despite the modern aphorism that "We don't do God" the political values of the Bible still form the basis of the British political system. That said, the Bible will not tell you how to vote. Christians can, do and should disagree about which political manifesto is most in agreement with God's vision for his creation.

That may frustrate some Christians but it is useful to remember that although how we vote is important, more important is how we decide to vote. What the Bible can do is to provide us with a yardstick against which we can measure government and opposition pledges, equip us with questions to ask of those who seek political authority over us, and allow us to develop the character that will help us judge wisely.

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[i] Matthew 22:15-22
[ii] Psalm 24:1
[iii] 1Samuel 8
[iv] 2 Samuel 7:5-16
[v] Hosea 1:11; 3:5
[vi] Acts 16:37-39; 22:23-29
[vii] Acts 24:27; 25:9
[viii] See, for example, Psalm 82
[ix] Psalm 2:4-6
[x] Matthew 28:18
[xi] Acts 2:36
[xii] Acts 17:7
[xiii] Compare 1 Timothy 5:17-18
[xiv] 1 Timothy 3:1-12
[xv] Acts 2:41-42
[xvi] 1 Corinthians 5:9-13
[xvii] 1 Corinthians 6:1-4
[xviii] 1 Peter 5:1-4
[xix] Genesis 1:27-28; 2:20-24
[xx] Matthew 19:4-6; Ephesians 5:22-6:4; Colossians 3:18-21; 1 Peter 3:1-7
[xxi] 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Hebrews 12:1-12; James 3:1-6. See also the role of conscience in Romans 2:15
[xxii] Romans 13:4
[xxiii] John 18:36

[xxiv] Acts 19:23-41
[xxv] Genesis 3:20; Acts 17:26
[xxvi] Romans 3:23-24
[xxvii] One is tempted to reference all the gospels. John 4 will suffice
[xxviii] Galatians 3:26-28
[xxix] Deuteronomy 3:12-20
[xxx] Joshua 13-22
[xxxi] Leviticus 25
[xxxii] 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-10
[xxxiii] Matthew 5; John 15:9-10
[xxxiv] Romans 7:12
[xxxv] Deuteronomy 6:4-9
[xxxvi] Psalm 119:1
[xxxvii] Genesis 11:8-9
[xxxviii] 2 Kings 25; Jeremiah 29
[xxxix] Revelation 18
[xl] Deuteronomy 16:16
[xli] Exodus 18:13-26
[xlii] Matthew 25:31-46; Romans 14:9-12; 2 Corinthians 5:10
[xliii] Revelation 19:11-15
[xliv] Exodus 9:13-19
[xlv] Daniel 4:28-32
[xlvi] Acts 12:21-23
[xlvii] Acts 20:18-35
[xlviii] 2 Samuel 5:3; 2 Kings 23:1-3