



God ^{and} GOVERNMENT

A Biblical perspective
on the Role of the State

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On March 3, 2009, Dr. Cornelis Van Dam (Professor of Old Testament, Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches) made a presentation to MP's and Senators in the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa, Ontario.

This event was organized by the Association for Reformed Political Action (ARPA) Canada and was co-sponsored by Liberal MP John McKay and Conservative MP Maurice Vellacott.

The following pages are a transcript of the presentation from Dr. Van Dam.

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God & Government

A Biblical Perspective on the Role of the State



Why talk about a biblical perspective on the role of government? Who needs the Bible for that? Let's keep religion out of this! I'm sure such sentiments are fairly common today. In the interest of fairness, it should be recognized at the outset that any view of government will be influenced by one's world view and religious mind-set. An atheist will have his view of the task of government influenced by his presuppositions and so will a Christian and so will a Muslim. There is no such thing as a completely neutral person or a perfectly objective view of government. So then why should we spend time on the Bible's view of the state?

Our nation has a rich Christian heritage of which we are beneficiaries and which we would dismiss to our hurt. Our institutions such as the rule of law and a judiciary that is to be independent have a biblical basis. Now when we speak of a biblical view of the state, we speak of how things should be — utopia. I recognize that the real world of politics is quite different from the norm to which Christians in government would aspire. But it is important to see what the place of government should be. It helps to direct our thinking.

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So let us consider what the Bible says about the role of the state. It will be helpful if we use the classic passage on the subject, Romans 13:1-4 and unpack some of its meaning. I hope to keep this presentation to about 35 minutes so that we have time for discussion. Romans 13:1-4 reads:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for

those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. (Romans 13:1-4)

The key topics that I'll consider flow from this passage. I'll start with the source of government authority.

The Source of Government's Authority

Romans 13 makes clear that "There is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" (v. 1). So the origin of all authority is God. He is supreme and sovereign.

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There are considerable implications coming out of these words. Government derives its authority from God. Regardless of the type of administration it is, all authority finds its origin in the Almighty. This was true of Pontius Pilate and the Roman emperor in New Testament times (John 19:11). It is also true of dictatorships and democracies of our day. All this is not to say that God approves of every form of government or of everyone who holds governmental office. It does mean that it is God who has ordained the institution of government and that all authority to rule comes from him. In our democratic context, it is good to remember that ultimately it is not the voters who put governments in power, but, at the end of the day, it is the sovereign God of heaven and earth who does so. It is therefore ultimately to God that government is responsible and will one day have to give account (cf. Ps. 82; 96:13; 98:9). Furthermore, since God is the origin of government, citizens are to obey and honour those set over them by God.

That is why the truth of God having established all authority is preceded and followed by the injunction for obedience.

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This command to obey the authorities is repeated elsewhere. Paul wrote to Timothy:

“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” (1 Tim. 2:1-3).

To Titus the apostle Paul wrote:

“Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient” (Titus 3:1).

Peter also exhorted his readers:

“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors ... Show proper respect to everyone ... fear God, honour the king” (1 Pet. 2:13-14, 17).

Living in egalitarian times where people only accept authority reluctantly, it is good to remember that government holds an office which people are to respect. The reason is because government is to be God’s servant for good.

God’s Servant for Good

When God’s Word urged believers to honour the authorities, the reason given in Romans 13 is that rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong.

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do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. (Rom 13:3-4)

Notice how the governing authorities are characterized “as God’s servant to do you good” (v. 4). One basic implication for government that follows from this characterization is that as servant of God, the civil authorities, whether they realize it or not, are to be subservient to God and should, therefore, recognize his higher authority. Civil government can never consider itself as an autonomous power. As servants of the Almighty, they are duty bound to recognize and protect God’s ordinances as seen in his creation and the nature of things and seek to act according to the principles for civil government as we find them in his Word. This is not very popular in our current culture where anti-Christian sentiment is widespread, but the need to recognize the sovereignty of God is biblical truth.

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Let us explore a little further what it means that government is “God’s servant to do you good.” This means that the well being of the people must be paramount in the mind of government. It is important to note that this is not the same as saying that government is in the service of the people and is simply to do what the people want. There are situations when government must ultimately serve either God or the people. It is not always possible to do both. Indeed, the norm and standard for government according to the Bible is not the current will of the people but the will of God. To discern God’s will in the political arena can be very difficult. Even when it is obvious what needs to be done, ideally speaking, obeying God in politics usually means small incremental steps towards the desired goal. The key thing is that Christian politicians have a clear conscience before God.

Now it should be pointed out that God is the Creator and renewer of creation. He knows what is best for he designed creation and human nature. And so doing God’s will, where such is obvious, is at bottom also the best for the nation. That truth can be illustrated with current

examples. For instance, the forty-eight year miscarriage of justice in the case of Steven Truscott who was sentenced to hang for murder would not have happened if biblical norms for conviction had been used, namely that there should be at least two witnesses (Deut. 19:15) and that circumstantial evidence is not sufficient for conviction of murder.¹ Other examples include the fact that there would be far fewer people suffering from HIV/Aids infection if biblical norms of sexual behaviour were promoted by government (Lev. 18:22; Rom. 1:22-27). There would also be far fewer abortions if abstinence were promoted by government and the nation be encouraged to save sex for marriage, as God desires (Exod. 20:14; Heb. 13:4).

Now a government can be faced with some real life obstacles in seeking to implement God's will for the country. In the realm of politics what is possible is not always the same as what may be desired. Politics is the business of working with what is achievable. It is however important to note that since God's will is good, there will virtually always be some sort of empirical evidence to back up a biblical approach to ethical and other issues. That certainly is true of the examples just mentioned. In any case, as God's servant for good, government must, wherever possible, show leadership in promoting good morals and responsible living and usually this can be done by showing that this is good for the nation.

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One of the critical areas of government responsibility mentioned in Romans 13 is that it is government's task to maintain justice in the land. We read in Romans 13:4 that government

"does not bear the sword for nothing. It is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."

Something similar is said in 1 Peter 2:14 where those in power are described as sent by God

"to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right."

A central concern of government, therefore, has to be to restrain evil and punish the evil doer. We do not live in a perfect world, and in

Parliament there are different views of what is good. The arguments against the bill raising the age of consent for sex from 14 to 16 and its narrow passage in the senate showed that not all agree on the norms for what is proper. However, if government is to be God's servant for good, then the good that is to be promoted wherever possible is what God considers to be good. And as Creator, he does know what is best for his creation.

Maintaining Justice and Righteousness

Maintaining justice in the land starts with acknowledging the sovereignty of God. The Preamble of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) articulates this truth by stating that "Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law." If God is to be recognized as supreme, then the country's elected representatives, the government, have the first responsibility to set the moral compass of the country. It will not do to let the courts decide on the direction of a nation. We must remember that

"righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people"
(Prov. 14:34; cf. Ps. 33:12).

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A government's responsibility begins with how it conducts itself. It must be obvious that the manner in which government does its business is above reproach, transparent, and accountable. The importance of the government's setting the example for the nation in how it manages its own responsibilities with integrity cannot be overestimated. A government that acts according to the highest moral principles gives a credible model for the nation to follow and so exerts a strong moral leadership. Such government goes a long way to raising the ethical level of a nation.

Such a government will also make sure that the credibility of the judicial system is protected and maintained. Such credibility is enhanced when judges are appointed who realize that their task when judging a particular case is to interpret law and not to create new law according to the current moral whims of the majority. Human nature being what

it is, the practice of creating new law has invariably led to lower moral standards for the nation.² Judicial activism also undermines confidence in the judicial process for one never knows for sure whether the law will be upheld or not. Government has the responsibility to pass new legislation as necessary to make it possible for judges to render decisions which are consistent with the standards God has set.

With respect to maintaining justice by means of the courts, other things could be mentioned as well. For example, it is important that processes of reconciliation and forgiveness are implemented where possible; that punishment is in proportion to the crime, and so on. But all these issues essentially fall under the government's responsibility to make it possible for judges to do their work consistent with the principles of God's law.

With respect to the economic life of a nation, government has the obligation to set fair rules for commerce so that the rights of the economically weak in society are protected. Government should also ensure that those who are able to create employment opportunities have the freedom and possibilities to do so. There should be resources for the poor and needy in the land. All should share in the prosperity of the nation.

With respect to the Christian heritage of Canada, the state has a moral responsibility to protect this important treasure. Government by its very size and power leads a nation. When matters of national significance happen, government should not be ashamed to acknowledge one's dependence on the God of heaven and earth and offer prayer of thanksgiving in times of national rejoicing and petition for help and comfort in times of national tragedy. An example of how not to do it concerns a commemorative service some years ago for the 229 people killed in the crash of Swissair Flight 111 off Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia. The federal government specifically denied a Christian minister the right to read from the New Testament or mention Jesus Christ during the official government-sponsored service held on September 9, 1998.³ To have granted that permission would not have imposed Christianity on anyone. It would simply have been a

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recognition of Canada’s historic identity as having a Christian heritage. Government needs to create an environment where the Christian gospel can be freely preached, without hindering the rights of other faiths.

When a government is servant for good (Rom. 13:4) and a country is ruled with justice and righteous, then God promises that

“the fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever” (Isa. 32:17).

This also counts for governments and countries today. The state however cannot do everything. According to the Bible there are limits as to what government can and should do.

Limitations

The general description of the duty of government in Romans 13 and elsewhere suggests that the task of the governing authorities is a relatively limited one. To a modern mind this may seem strange. Today government intrusion into the lives of its citizens grows continually. Virtually every aspect of our existence is touched by government controls and laws. To be sure, the desirability of this is being debated. On the one side of the political spectrum are those who would want the government to be even more involved in assuring adequate guarantees for the well-being of its citizens, particularly in matters of health care, minimum incomes, and redistribution of wealth. On the other side are those who want government activity to be limited to the basic essentials such as law and order, defence, taxation, and providing for the most needy in society.

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How should we as Christians consider the scope of the task of government? Scripture makes clear that a government’s task has limitations. This is already obvious from the fact that only God is sovereign and that the state’s authority is derived from God. Furthermore, the designation of civil authorities as servants of God (Rom. 13:4) underlines the inherent limitations of their authority. A servant can only do what his master or lord gives him authorization for.

God alone is the source of all authority (Rom. 13:1) and only he has unlimited power over creation. With such a sovereign God in control, all governments must be mindful of their limitations. No government can simply assume more power to itself. Its authority needs to be given by God.

All this is clear from the fact that there are other authority structures that need to be respected such as family, church, and economic entities. Each of these areas have their own authority. The family and home has its own authority structure given by God who established marriage and family. The state should only interfere in exceptional circumstances, such as child abuse or family breakdown as in divorce or desertion. Then the state needs to protect the interests of the different parties by just laws. But the state cannot force Christian parents, for example, to refrain from disciplining their children in a godly manner, including a justified use of spanking.⁴

The church also has its own authority structure. While the state can regulate things that are vital for governing the country, such as marriage legislation, it has no business to intrude into ecclesiastical matters, such as forcing churches to recognize gay marriages. As servant of God, it is the duty of government to enable the church, the people of God, to do their mission unhindered. God's Word says that we are to pray for the authorities so that Christians

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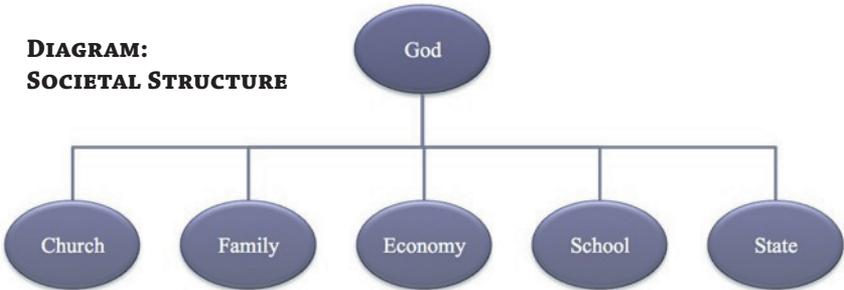
“may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:2-4).

Government must give the church all the room it needs to be a light to the nation and to share the gospel. This includes the church's task to call sin by its name, even though society may deny, for example, that homosexual behaviour is sinful.

At the same time, because of the hardness of human hearts, government may have to tolerate that which the church cannot tolerate. For example, a government committed to upholding biblical morality, will still have to reckon with the current situation in which what is

biblically speaking sinful behaviour is now considered a human right. Government needs to recognize human depravity and work with that reality (cf. Matt. 19:8). Scripture also teaches us that it is not the task of the state to fight society's sins and heresies with the sword. What the Bible calls heresy and false religion, such as secularism and Islam are to be fought with the sword of the Word of God. That is the church's task. The state must exercise patient tolerance and give freedom of religion, not just to Christians, but also to all non-Christians. Even if Canada were to have a distinctively Christian government, such a government should in no way put any pressure on non-Christians to become Christian. Toleration is a biblical notion for a multi-cultural society (cf. Matt. 7:12;13:24-30, 36-43). But government must give leadership and try to lead society into a more biblical moral direction.

**DIAGRAM:
SOCIETAL STRUCTURE**



Conversely, the church as an institution has no business intruding into the affairs of the state. The church's duty is to preach the gospel. Christians have the duty to air their views in the public square and seek to live out their faith in all of life, but the church has neither the calling nor the right nor the expertise to give advice to the civil authorities on how to run the country.

Coming now to another area of life, the economic institutions, also here government should know its limits and not overgovern this aspect of the nation's life. The key responsibility of the state is to promote justice and righteousness according to God's norms. That determines their agenda and the limitations of their power also with respect to the economic life of the nation. That will also determine when more laws need to be drafted to protect citizens and promote stability in the land. In this connection it was therefore unjust, by way of example, for a court to order a private printing firm that it must print material for gay and lesbian customers even though this order violated the conscience of the owner.⁵

In view of the different authority structures in society, we can speak of differentiated responsibilities. The different relationships of life, such as a family, a church, a business enterprise, or an educational institution, all have their own specific needs and responsibilities which no one else can do for them. Differentiated responsibility should be recognized for what it is and government needs to acknowledge the limitations of what it should be busy with. There is also another related concern. People should not expect government to do everything and assume all kinds of responsibilities that are not inherent to the core tasks of governing. Indeed, it is dangerous for the state to act as if it is omnipotent and has the solution for all types of problems and troubles in human society. As the examples of Hitler and Mao Zedong show, it is relatively easy to create the myth that government will solve all difficulties. But there is a high price to be paid for this myth. It requires that people surrender more and more of their freedom and responsibilities to a state that could easily develop into a totalitarian one since it is expected to do much. The more government is asked to do, the more freedom people will need to give up. However, to hand over one's responsibilities to the state so that government can provide is a denial of one's own obligations and duties to God as given to each unit of society, beginning with the family. One must be ever vigilant of the state taking too much power to itself.

Even though democratic processes provide some guarantees against excesses, yet the danger is not imaginary that even in a democratic society certain unbiblical ways of thinking of how society should be organized can become so widely accepted that government is tempted to impose them on the entire country and thereby rob many of their freedom. For example, in some circles it is becoming commonplace to assume that government has the duty to take care of pre-school children by providing subsidized day care facilities for everyone. However, taking care of pre-school children is a responsibility God has given to parents in the first place and not to the government. The government has no business in taking on this role for the country's children but should rather seek to strengthen the family unit by encouraging and making it economically attractive for a parent to stay at home

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to nurture their offspring. Children are also the beneficiaries when God's plan for the family unit is honoured. The role of government should be limited.

On the other hand, while we must be vigilant against government assuming too many responsibilities, we must also not expect too little from this servant of God for our good (Rom. 13:4). In many areas of life, government is the only realistic body to assume certain responsibilities. Two examples come to mind. Only government with its authority and coercive power can see to it that the differentiated responsibilities and authorities in society are protected and able to function. Put differently, only government can make sure that the family unit, commercial enterprises, churches, and educational institutions (to mention the major players) all work as they should and contribute to a well-run and peaceful society. Sin is very disruptive and is never absent in human relationships. Government has the duty to restrain sin and its effects and to let the different spheres of responsibility and authority function as God intended.⁶

A second example is that government can often best undertake mega-economic projects that will be advantageous for the nation. The ongoing James Bay Project, a gigantic hydro-electric development in northern Quebec that has been under construction for over thirty years, would be inconceivable without long term sustained government funding.

Perhaps in general it could be said that as long as government does not interfere in the God-given responsibilities of individuals, families and other societal organizations, government should be free to work for the common good where it can.

In Closing

You as parliamentarians and government officials have a very high calling and privilege. You are God's servants for the good of Canada. It is the duty of the nation to pray for you and support you in every possible way. May God bless you as you seek to fulfill the task he has placed upon you and may you be a blessing for our nation.

Endnotes

¹ On the Steven Truscott case, see <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/truscott/>, accessed on January 29, 2009.

² See, e.g., Rory Leishman, *Against Judicial Activism: The Decline of Freedom and Democracy in Canada* (Montreal; Kingston: McGill•Queen's University Press, 2006). ³ See, e.g., The Calgary Sun of December 13, 1998, accessed on August 9, 2007 at http://fathersforlife.org/rights/swiss_air_111_crash.htm.

³ See, e.g., The Calgary Sun of December 13, 1998, accessed on August 9, 2007 at http://fathersforlife.org/rights/swiss_air_111_crash.htm.

⁴ The senate approved an anti-spanking bill on June 17, 2008 and sent it to the House of Commons. See http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/06/19/spanking_bill.html. (accessed January 29, 2009).

⁵ See "Religious Discrimination. The Brockie case (2000)," *Queen's Human Rights Bulletin* September 2005 at <http://www.queensu.ca/humanrights/hreb/Religion/Brockie.htm> (accessed on January 29, 2009).

⁶ See, e.g., on this David T. Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 252•60.

Recommended Reading

Carson, D. A., *Christ and Culture Revisited*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. Chapters 4 deals with secularism, democracy, freedom, and power, and chapter 5 discusses church and state. A very readable, lively, and up-to-date account.

Cranfield, C. E. B., David Kilgour, and John Warwick Montgomery. *Christians in the Public Square: Law, Gospel, and Public Policy*. Edmonton: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy, 1996. A helpful collection of essays by experts dealing with a wide range of issues.

Koyzis, David T. *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003. A scholarly but very clear overview. The last chapter deals with the task of the state.

McIlroy, David. *A Biblical View of Law and Justice*. Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2004. This commendable study is written by a lawyer who seeks to bring a biblical vision to law today without avoiding the difficult questions.

Meeter, H. Henry. *The Basic Ideas of Calvinism*. 6th edition, revised by Paul A. Marshall. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990. Calvinism has had an enormous impact on our common Christian heritage in the western world especially in matters political. This book is an excellent introduction. Most of this book deals with politics and the Bible, including topics such as duties of the state, authority of government, church and state, and civil liberty.



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