

# The Christian Idea of Government

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All government begins in the heart of man with his ability (or inability) to direct, regulate, manage, and control his life. There are two spheres of government — internal and external. Internal government is self-government. External government occurs in the family, church, business, associations, and civil government. External spheres of government are a reflection of the degree of internal self-government a person or people possess. Internal government is causative to external government.

The flow of power in a Christian society is from the internal to the external, from the inside-out. All authority and power comes from God. It flows from Him into the heart and mind of man, and then out into the family, church, business, schools, and civil realm. This idea greatly affected the development of government in America. **Elias Boudinot**, President of the Continental



Congress and first President of the American Bible Society, revealed a fundamental principle upon which America was founded:

Another essential ingredient in the happiness we enjoy as a nation, and which arises from the principles of the revolution, is the right that every people have to govern themselves in such manner as they judge best calculated for the common benefit.<sup>1</sup>

This was a new concept, because during most of history people lived under “ruler’s law,” where the rulers made the laws and the people had no voice in the matter. However, in America, the people made the laws, and everyone, including the rulers, was subject to them.

America’s Founders understood that a people cannot govern themselves in civil affairs if they do not govern their own lives well. **Robert C. Winthrop**, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1847-49, said in 1849:

All societies of men must be governed in some way or other. The less they may have of stringent State Government, the more they must have of individual self-government. The less they rely on public law or physical force, the more they must rely on private moral restraint. Men, in a word, must necessarily be controlled either by a power within them, or by a power without them; either by the Word of God, or by the strong arm of man; either by the Bible or the bayonet.<sup>2</sup>



The basis of the ability for man to govern himself well is rooted in his being in subjection to a higher power. The Founders’ firm commitment to God, as well as their commitment to govern their lives according to His laws as contained in the Bible, was the foundation for self-government in America. Examination of the scores of constitutions, compacts, and charters written in colonial America readily reveals that the source of their civil law was found in the Bible. For example, in the Massachusetts Body of Liberties (which was a precursor to our Bill of Rights), written by Rev. Nathaniel Ward in 1641, the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) was the basis for its criminal code, and “in case of the defect of a law in any particular [sic] case” the standard was “the word of God.”<sup>3</sup> Often the colonists would

quote directly from the Scriptures and give references to justify their civil laws, as seen, for example, in the laws of the Pilgrims.<sup>4</sup>

Self-government is limited apart from God; therefore, the ability to govern well is limited where the people and leaders do not seek to govern themselves and their nation under God. **George Washington** said, “It is impossible to govern the universe without the aid of a Supreme Being.”<sup>5</sup>



The Christian idea of government led to the establishment of the American Christian Constitutional Federal Republic. It was unique in history and was only possible because the citizens were self-governed.

The foundation for self-government is laid in the families of a nation. Families must begin early teaching the principle of self-government. One night, many years ago I was teaching my son, who was then about five years old, about self-government. I gave him a definition he could understand, telling him that “self-government is doing what you are supposed to do without anybody telling you.” The next morning he woke me early, took me to his bedroom, pointed to his bed, which he had made up all by himself without anybody telling him to do so, and remarked: “Dad, I was being self-governed, wasn’t I?” The transformation of nations begins with such small steps.

The flow of power in a Christian society is from the inside-out. The flow of power in a pagan society is from the outside-in, from the top-down. This top-down flow occurs because the people see the rulers as the source of power and authority — they are the ultimate authority in the earth. However, the state is not man’s savior, nor is it the ultimate authority in the earth. Caesar thought he was, but Jesus made clear his authority was from God and was limited.<sup>6</sup> Most leaders throughout history have had this Caesar mentality, with most citizens agreeing. The spread of Christian ideas, especially after the Protestant Reformation, changed this in many nations, but, unfortunately, a majority of these nations are moving back toward a pagan view of government. Many people in the United States are embracing this idea as well. When trouble comes, who do people look to for help, provision, and “salvation”? Many first look to civil government, thinking the government owes them this provision. Many in the media agree and often lambaste the government if it is not acting fast enough, being efficient, or providing enough relief. (Since it is not the purpose of civil government to provide all things for the citizens, it will never do this effectively or efficiently.)

Secularists have no savior, so they often look to government to be their savior — to bring peace, to establish a utopia, to meet needs, to provide material things, and so on. Christians have a Savior and do not need government for this. From a Christian perspective, civil government is a divine institution with a legitimate function, but it is very limited in what it is supposed to do. It is to protect the righteous, punish the evil doer, and administer God’s justice in the civil realm that is under its sphere of authority.<sup>7</sup>

The Christian idea of government teaches that the state exists to serve man, not vice versa; that government flows from the internal to the external, from the bottom-up; that government begins with self-government, then flows to the family, church, and the civil realm.

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<sup>1</sup> Elias Boudinot, “Oration at Elizabethtown, New Jersey, on the Fourth of July, 1793.” *American Eloquence: A Collection of Speeches and Addresses, by the Most Eminent Orators of America*, New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1858, Vol. 1, p. 265.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert C. Winthrop, "Address to Massachusetts Bible Society Meeting, May 28, 1849," *Addresses and Speeches on Various Occasions*, Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1852, p. 172.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Morris, editor, *Significant Documents in United States History, Vol. 1*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1969, p. 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> *The Laws of the Pilgrims, 1672 & 1685*, A Facsimile Edition, published by Michael Glazier and the Pilgrim Society, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> *Maxims of Washington*, compiled by John Frederick Schroeder, New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1854, p. 341.

<sup>6</sup> See Matthew 12:17-21; John 19:11; Stephen McDowell, *Building Godly Nations*, Charlottesville: Providence Foundation, 2003, pp. 43 ff.; Mark A. Beliles and Stephen K. McDowell, *America's Providential History*, Charlottesville: Providence Foundation, 1989, pp. 29 ff; Stephen McDowell, *Rendering to Caesar the Things that Are God's*, Charlottesville: Providence Foundation, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Rom. 13:1-5; 1 Pet. 2:13-14; for more on a Biblical view of government see *Building Godly Nations*, Chapter 3; Stephen McDowell and Mark Beliles, *Liberating the Nations*, chapters 1, 11, Charlottesville: Providence Foundation, 1995.