

What the Bible Says about Government

By Art Lindsley, PhD

The United States of America was born out of a debate about the size and scope of government.

The American colonies separated from England over the issue. They then ratified the United States Constitution only after lengthy deliberation about the role and scope of their new federal government. The first political parties built their platforms around the size and role of government.

This debate continues to define American politics and impacts the lives of individuals in many other countries as well. Clearly, it's a controversial, multi-faceted issue.

Our perspective on government has massive implications. Laws, regulations, and taxes can impact the way we work, our freedom to trade, our ability to become entrepreneurs, and our ownership of private property. They impact our ability to build a flourishing society. It's not an easy issue, but it's certainly important.

What does the Bible say? Some argue that the Bible teaches limited government. Others maintain that the Bible teaches Marxism or socialism, or at least is consistent with big government of some sort. The Bible doesn't give us an easy, one-verse answer, but it does provide us with some guidelines.

What are some considerations that can help us frame this debate and work towards a conclusion? In this article, we will look at the first of four principles that give us context for this discussion:

- Government is established by God.
- Government's role is more negative than positive.
- Limited government suits a fallen people.
- The Bible warns us about large governments.

The first principle—one that is often forgotten—recognizes that God has established government. This means that though government can grow beyond its proper role to become abusive, it is not intrinsically bad.

Romans 13:1-7 is the *locus classicus* on the topic of government. In fact, theologian E. F. Harrison calls it "the most notable passage in the New Testament on Christian civic responsibility."

Romans 13:1 says,

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, where government is twice called a “minister of God.” Again, in verse 6, rulers are called “servants of God.” Theologian John Murray writes in his commentary *The Epistle to the Romans*,

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.

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.

If the government forbids what God commands or commands what God forbids, then God's commandments take precedence over human authority. For example, Daniel's friends—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—chose to disobey King Nebuchadnezzar and face being burned alive rather than worship idols. When Darius forbade his subjects to pray to anyone but himself, Daniel openly disobeyed.

At the same time, these men were among the king's most trusted and loyal advisers. They served him honestly and faithfully despite his numerous mistakes. They were not blindly obedient but were willing to respectfully challenge him when appropriate. They did not hold grudges or plot against him, even when he personally wronged them.

Such should be our attitude toward government. We are not to blindly obey it, especially if it demands that we do something contrary to God's law. Yet it is an institution ordained by God, and we should make every effort to abide by its laws, show respect to our leaders, and participate in the political process when appropriate.

For an examination of the other three principles that can guide our thinking about the size of government, see <http://tifwe.org/resources/government-small-or-large>.

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