

What the Bible Says About Big Government, Pt. 1

This is part one of a two-part essay.

Evidence is mounting that many government programs fail to accomplish all that their advocates had promised. What do the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures have to say on the subject of government power and functions? News reports about clergymen's public statements and actions often reveal the men of the cloth on the side of big government – favoring more handouts, more intervention, more regulation. Does the Bible support that position?

First, however, just what is government?

The Essence of Big Government: What Authorities Say

- “The civil law ... is the force of the commonwealth, engaged to protect the lives, liberties, and possessions of those who live according to its laws, and has power to take away life, liberty, or goods from him who disobeys.” (John Locke)
- “Government is not reason, it is not eloquence – it is force. Like fire it is a dangerous servant and a fearful master ...” (George Washington)
- “Law is the common force organized to act as an obstacle to injustice.” (Frederic Bastiat)
- “The essential characteristic of all government, whatever its form, is authority. ... Government, in its last analysis, is organized force.” (Woodrow Wilson)
- “The state belongs to the sphere of coercion. It would be madness to renounce coercion, particularly in the epoch of the dictatorship of the proletariat.” (Nikolai Lenin)
- “A government may be freely chosen, but it is still not

all of us. It is some men vested with authority over other men." And democracy "... is a name for a particular set of conditions under which the right to coerce others is acquired and held." (Charles Frankel)

- "The State is the party that always accompanies its proposals by coercion, and backs them by force. " (Charles A. Reich)

It should come as no surprise to students of the Bible that the Scriptures analyzed the ultimate nature of government much earlier than any of the writers cited.

Christians sometimes wonder what Jesus had to say about the role of government and theologians normally reply that he said very little on the subject. The principal relevant statement recorded in the gospels is His response to a question as to whether it was proper to pay the head tax imposed by Rome. The tax amounted to about 25 cents a person and was regarded as a mark of servitude to Rome.

In ancient times the authority of a ruler was symbolized by the circulation of his coinage and coins bearing the ruler's image were considered his property, in the final analysis. When Jesus requested that His questioners show Him one of the coins used to pay the tax, a coin was brought and He asked, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They replied that it was Caesar's. Jesus then said, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." The account is told in Matthew 22 and in parallels in the gospels according to Mark and according to Luke.

While Jesus said little about the power of government and what government should or should not do, two other New Testament writers came down solidly on the side of respect for the civil authorities and obedience to law. One of these was the apostle Paul. A respected New Testament scholar wrote about Paul a few years ago, "It is evident from many allusions in his writings,

that the thought of Rome had strongly affected his imagination. He associated the great city with all that was most august in earthly power. He believed that it had been divinely appointed to maintain order and peace among the contending races."

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul offered the following admonition: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are appointed by God" (Rom. 13:1).

Pay your taxes and give respect and honor to whom they are due, said Paul. Conduct yourself properly and you will have no reason to fear an official. "But if you do what is evil, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain" (Rom. 13:4).

And St. Peter wrote:

"Submit yourselves to every human authority for the Lord's sake, whether it be to the king, as supreme, or to governors, as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and to praise those who do right. For it is the will of God that by doing right you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men. As free people, do not use your liberty as a covering for evil, but live as servants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king" (1 Pet. 2:13-17).

The statements are brief because the writers were not primarily concerned for man's relation with the authorities but for his relation with God and his fellow man. But the statements are definite. And they provided the scriptural foundation for what some students have considered Martin Luther's exaggerated reverence for the State.

While there is support for paying taxes, obedience to law, and respect for civil authority in the New Testament, no detailed analysis of the nature of government or the proper functions of government is to be found there. There is, however, ample

guidance for the individual conduct of government officials. They are human beings, so they will be fair, as all humans should be. They will deal justly with the people. Tax collectors will not steal because nobody should steal.

Another Biblical View

In the Old Testament, the writer of the books of 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel draws a definite contrast between limited government and the all-powerful State. The writer of the two books drew on earlier sources, some of which probably went back as far as 1000 B.C. or earlier and all of which had been completed by about 600 B.C. For generations the Jewish people had been led by officials called judges, of whom at least one, Deborah, was a woman. Best known of the judges to modern readers is Gideon, because his name is carried by the organization recognized for its practice of distributing Bibles in hotels and motels. The judges combined civil, military, and religious functions in their office. They led the Jewish people in battle against their enemies, settled questions of law, administered justice in disputes between individuals, and functioned as priests and prophets. To the enemies of Israel they often showed no quarter and in some of their judicial decisions they may have been arbitrary but their leadership of their own people was apparently rather mild. The writer of the book of Judges reports, in chapter 17 and again in his concluding verse, Judges 21:25, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyonn did what was right in his own eyes."

Gideon did not even want to be king. After he had led the men of Israel successfully against their enemies, they asked him to rule over them but he replied, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you."

After the death of Gideon one of his sons, Abimelech, seized power briefly and killed all of his brothers except one, the youngest, Jotham, who hid himself and escaped. When Jotham was

told what his brother had done, he related a parable, recorded in Judges 9, about the trees going forth to anoint a king over themselves. The olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine all declined to abandon their productive pursuits to become king, so the trees then turned to the bramble and the bramble accepted.

The Worst on Top

In *The Road to Serfdom*, Prof. Friedrich A. Hayek, for somewhat different reasons from those cited in Jotham's parable, reached a conclusion that resembles the parable of the trees and the bramble. Prof. Hayek describes how kakistocracy arises in a chapter entitled, "Why the Worst Get on Top."

Samuel was the last of the series of prophet-judges. He administered justice in his own city of Ramah, a few miles north of Jerusalem, and traveled a judicial circuit that took him annually to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah. When senility approached, Samuel made his two sons judges but the Scripture records that they lacked their father's honorable character and "they followed after unlawful gain, and they took bribes, and they perverted justice" (1 Sam. 8:3).

The Jewish people were still engaged in the prolonged effort to conquer the land they had occupied. Recurring wars threatened their security. Such enemies as the Philistines were better organized and better equipped than the people of Israel who retained their loose tribal structure and had not yet fully abandoned the nomadic life. So the elders of Israel came to Samuel with a request: "You are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now, install for us a king to govern us like all the nations" (1 Sam 8:5).

The request displeased Samuel and he prayed to the Lord who admonished Samuel to heed their request, "For it is not you they have rejected, but Me they have rejected from reigning over them" (1 Sam 8:7). But Samuel was directed to tell them

what it would be like to have a king. He did so in words recorded in 1 Samuel 8:

“This will be the judgment concerning the king who will reign over you: Your sons he will take in order to place them for himself in his chariots and as his horsemen, and they will run before his chariot, and in order to assign for himself captains of thousands and captains of fifties, and to plow his ground, and to gather in his harvest, and to make his weapons of war and the equipment of his chariots. And your daughters he will take for perfumers, and cooks, and bakers. And your choicest fields, and vineyards, and olive groves he will take and give them to his servants. And of your seed fields and your vineyards he will take a tenth of their harvest and will give it to his high officials and to his servants. And your menservants and your maidservants, and the best of your young men and asses he will take and make do his work. Your flocks he will take a tenth of, but you will be his for slaves. And you will cry out in that day because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves ...” (1 Sam 8:11-18).

The people refused to listen to Samuel, however, and insisted that they wanted a king to govern them and fight their battles. Their wishes prevailed. They got big government.

The king who was selected was Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin. Many years before, when Moses explained to the people of Israel the law that he had delivered to them, he told them what kind of person to choose as king when the time came. His counsel is recorded in Deuteronomy 17:

“When you have come into the land which the Lord your God gives you and possess it and dwell there and then say, ‘I will set a king over me just like all the nations that are around me,’ you must set a king over you whom the Lord your God will choose. You must select a king over you who is from

among your brothers. You may not select a foreigner over you who is not your countryman. What is more, he shall not accumulate horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order that he accumulate horses, for as the Lord has said to you, 'You must not go back that way ever again.' He shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor shall he acquire for himself excess silver and gold" (Deut. 17:14-17).

In a book based on his research at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace of Stanford University, Alvin Rabushka wrote, "Governments take resources from the public but use them to maximize their own welfare." Both Moses and Samuel recognized this propensity and warned about it. To modern taxpayers the tenth part of their grain and vineyards and flocks, that Samuel said the king would require, must appear mild indeed but in time the burden became onerous to the people. Samuel's prophecy that one day they would cry out because of their king was not realized immediately. Then, as now, persons with the vision to foretell the consequences of certain popular choices and actions could only tell *what* would occur as a result, not *when* it would occur. {eoa}

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This is part one of a two-part essay. It has been slightly edited. Join us tomorrow for part two. For the full, original article—published on March 1, 1976—go to .