

# God and Government and the Ten Commandments

When Professor John Wycliffe of Oxford University produced the first hand-written translation of the New Testament into English (in the 14th Century), he wrote in the preface: *“The Bible is given for the government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”*

American President, Abraham Lincoln, quoted from Wycliffe in his famous Gettysburg Address when he said: *“that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the face of the earth.”* Lincoln also noted that: *“The philosophy of the classroom will become the philosophy of the government in the next generation.”*

Many people labour under the delusion that the Bible has nothing to say concerning social structures, constitutional models or political affairs. However, while approximately 29% of the Bible deals with spiritual matters and our personal lives, 71% of the Bible deals with social, political and national issues.

Our Lord Jesus Christ taught important spiritual principles and concepts that affect every area of social and political life. To the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, Jesus said: **“You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given to you from above”** John 19:11. Civil authority is clearly delegated by and answerable to God.

The Bible is very clear that God has instituted civil government as **“an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer”** (Romans 13:4). The civil government is called to be a minister of God’s justice: **“to punish those who do wrong”** (1 Peter 2:14).

The primary duties and responsibilities of civil government are the protection of law-abiding citizens and the punishment of law-breaking criminals. Psalm 101 reminds us that the duty of God-honouring rulers is to destroy the wicked, to root out evil and to protect the law abiding.

Jesus taught that we are to: **“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s”** (Matthew 22:21). The civil government does have certain legitimate rights and responsibilities, but these are very limited. We are to pay taxes (but any taxation as high as 10% was condemned as: *“oppressive”*<sup>1</sup> Samuel 8:10 – 18), to serve in the military when required, to testify in court as a witness to any crime, and to respect the life, property and reputation of our neighbours. However, our worship of God, the education of our children, our private property, our individual enterprise and personal views (freedom of worship, freedom of education, free enterprise, freedom of speech) are clearly not made in the image of Caesar and are outside of the lawful jurisdiction of a Bible-based constitutional state.

Our Lord upheld the authority of the moral, social, economic and political Laws of God as recorded in the Old Testament: **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfil them. I tell you truth until Heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law... anyone who breaks one of the least of these Commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these Commandments will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.”** Matthew 5:17 – 19

In His public teaching, Jesus affirmed the Old Testament Laws against murder, theft and adultery (Matthew 5:21 – 27); the dishonouring of parents (Matthew 15:4); and perjury (Matthew 19:18). The Lord also affirmed the right to private ownership of property and the free market exchange and profit (Luke 16:11; 19:12 – 27; Matthew 20:1 – 15; 25:14 – 30).

Our Lord also taught that **civil authorities are to be public servants** (Matthew 20:25 – 28): **“The kings of the gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call**

***themselves benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.***” Luke 22:25 – 26

It is for this reason that officials in civil government are called “*ministers*” or “*servants*” of God. The concept that civil government is a servant of its citizens is a uniquely Christian idea that originated from these verses. Hence the term “*Prime Minister*” – as the first servant.

While most groups today emphasise external solutions to our many social problems – salvation through politics, or through changed social structures and laws – the teachings of Christ emphasize the need for internal change – within our hearts and minds. “***For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander...***” Matthew 15:19

**True freedom comes from within.** The foundations for a truly free and prosperous nation can only be laid in characters, minds and lives changed by the grace of God. In order to be successful, a society needs to be made up of honest citizens who will not steal, diligent workers who are hardworking and productive, compassionate families who are concerned for their neighbours, responsible workers who will fulfil their obligations and be faithful stewards of public resources. For nations to be strong, their families need to be strong. For governments to be good, their citizens need to be good. Those who cannot control themselves are not capable of ruling over a city (Proverbs 16:32). Those who cannot manage their household well are not qualified to lead others (1 Timothy 3:4 – 5).

God has instituted four spheres of government:

- **Self-government** – symbolised by our conscience.
- **Family government** – symbolised by the rod of discipline.
- **Church government** – symbolised by the keys of church discipline.
- **Civil government** – symbolised by the sword of justice.

God also established, in the government of Israel, ten key principles of freedom:

- A **written constitution** (covenant), based on the revealed Word of God, to clearly define and restrict the powers of government.
- A separation of powers and functions into three branches of civil government: **Executive** (the king or judge), **Legislative** (the Council and Sanhedrin) and **Judicial** (the elders or judges in each community). These three branches of government are based on how the Lord revealed His Government (Isaiah 9:6 – 7): “***For the Lord is our Judge, the Lord is our Law Giver, the Lord is our King...***” Isaiah 33:22
- An **independent judiciary** and **the right to a fair trial** (2 Chronicles 19:5 – 7). In Deuteronomy 19:15 – 19, the principles for a fair trial were set out: a) one is innocent until proven guilty, b) the right to due process of law, c) witnesses must personally confront the accused, d) a matter must be established by two or three witnesses, e) judges must be impartial.
- A **national legislature** (law-making body) where one house was composed of representative judges or officials elected by the people (Deuteronomy 1:13 – 17): “***But select capable men from all the people – men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain – and appoint them as officials...***” Exodus 18:21
- A **second house** in the legislature was composed of two hereditary elders from each of the eleven tribes (or geographic areas) of Israel in addition to 24 priests from the tribe of Levi and two scribes from each of the 12 tribes. This formed the Sanhedrin.
- An **executive officer** (judge or king) elected under the guidance of God and with the consent of the elders (Deuteronomy 17:14 – 20; 1 Chronicles 11:3).
- A **decentralized state** with most responsibilities and powers resting on the local government, the family and the individual. (Centralization of power in a unitary state has

always been a pagan tendency as seen in Nineveh, Egypt and Babylon.) Because power corrupts, it is wise to limit and divide the powers of civil government in a system of *checks and balances*. (Exodus 24:1; Deuteronomy 1:13 – 17; Acts 17:26)

- A **citizen's army** (militia) made up of trained citizens who have the right and duty to bear arms for the defense of their home, family, community and nation. (Numbers 1:2 – 3; Judges 3:2; Deuteronomy 20:1 – 4, 9)
- A **free market economy** based on the private ownership of property and individual free enterprise. Any taxation of 10% or higher was defined as *oppression* and any taxation of property, or inheritance, was strictly forbidden. Institutions and individuals involved in the full time service of the Lord were not allowed to be taxed. Biblical economics also forbids *unjust weights* (unback currency) *and measures* (inflation). (Exodus 20:15,17; Deuteronomy 19:14; Proverbs 10:2 – 4; 1 Thessalonians 3:10; 1 Samuel 8:10 – 18; 1 Kings 21:3)
- An **education** programme controlled by parents, aided by the Church, but independent of the state. (Deuteronomy 6:7; Ezra 7:23 – 24; Matthew 28:19; Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 2:8)

The Ten Commandments not only provide the foundation for all social order, but they are also the foundation for all our rights. Each Command deals with a specific area: God, worship, speech, time, authority, life, love, property, truth and conscience.

***“The Law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precept of the Lord is right, giving joy to the heart. The Commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.”*** Psalm 19:7 – 8

The Ten Commandments cover our responsibility to God, our responsibility to our parents and our responsibility to people. Obedience to the Decalogue would result in a respect for God, respect for people and respect for property.

***“The Law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul.”*** Psalm 19:7

Each Command includes a prohibition. For example: ***“You shall have no other gods before Me...”*** forbids polytheism, pantheism, and atheism. However, each Command also includes an implicit right. For example, the first Commandment implies freedom of worship.

Similarly, when the Third Commandment forbids profanity, false prophecies and blasphemy, and when the Ninth Commandment forbids perjury, gossip, or slander, these are the only restrictions given to speech. Outside of those limited prohibitions, there is freedom of speech.

Aside from forbidding idolatry in the Second Commandment and covetousness, greed and selfishness in the Tenth Commandment, we have freedom of conscience.

Where the Sixth Commandment forbids murder, suicide, abortion and euthanasia, it entrenches the right to life. Just as the Seventh Commandment prohibiting fornication, adultery, or perversion, entrenches the sanctity of marriage. Similarly by the Eighth Commandment forbidding theft and fraud, it entrenches the right to private ownership of property.

The Ten Commandments are the foundation for all these rights:

- Freedom of worship.
- The right to know God's Will and to do it.
- Freedom of speech.
- The right to work and to rest.
- Respect for authority.
- The right to life.

- The sanctity of marriage.
- Private ownership of property
- The right to be protected from slander.
- Freedom of conscience.

The Bible defines sin as **“lawlessness”** 1 John 3:4.

Jesus said: **“If you love Me, you will obey what I command.”** John 14:15

**“Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts... let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream!”** Amos 5:15, 24

As George Washington declared: *“Religion and morality are the indispensable supports to good government.”*

*“He knows not how to rule a kingdom, that cannot manage a province; nor can he wield a province, that cannot order a city; nor he order a city, that knows not how to regulate a village, nor he a village, that cannot guide a family, nor can that man govern well a family that knows not how to govern himself, neither can any govern himself unless his reason be Lord, and his will and appetite his vassals; nor can reason rule unless herself be ruled by God and wholly be obedient to Him.”* Hugo Grotius

*Dr. Peter Hammond is the author of **Biblical Principles for Africa.***