

Christmas Day, December 25, 2010

The World-Changing Effects of the Christian Faith

As I pause on this Christmas morning to contemplate the true meaning of Christ coming into the world for the salvation of mankind, my mind turns to the world-changing effects that the Christian faith has had on individual lives and on Western society as a whole over these last two thousand years. Anyone who has grown up over the last half-century as I have and is familiar with both history and the Christian faith cannot help but realize that the influence of Christian faith on the culture of the world at large is now decreasing and that the influence of ideas reminiscent of the ancient Greco-Roman world are increasing. In the secular society of today the beliefs and values of traditional Christianity are increasingly seen as being intolerant, backward, and 'passe' while the ancient Greco-Roman values of reason, tolerance and diversity are increasingly promoted as the standards of a modern, progressive and liberal society. This change has been coming on for the last couple of centuries; nevertheless, it is undeniable that it has been picking up speed over the last few decades. Indeed, in yesterday's Christmas Eve column in the New York Times Ross Douthat - himself a Roman Catholic Christian - states, "Christians need to find a way to thrive in a society that looks less and less like any sort of Christendom - and more and more like the diverse and complicated Roman Empire where their religion had its beginning 2,000 years ago this week."

Though I find general agreement with Douthat's viewpoint, what is often lost in any discussion of this topic are the hard and cold facts of what the Greco-Roman world was actually like and the dramatic civilizing and humanizing effects that the introduction of Christianity into the ancient Greco-Roman world had for that time. This overwhelmingly positive world-changing effect of the Christian faith has continued to be - despite many instances of corruptions and perversions - the single most important liberating, healing, and stabilizing factor in the history of the world since that time. Whatever corruptions and perversions have arisen in history along the way are totally dwarfed by the life-changing and society-changing effects that the Christian faith has had on millions and millions of lives since its introduction into the Greco-Roman world of the first century. Unfortunately, the multi-cultural perspective of the teaching of history that has dominated our public schools and universities over the last few decades has tended to turn upside down the actual historical realities of the ancient Greco-Roman world and of the alternative positive transforming effects of the Christian faith in individual lives and society as a whole in the history of the last 2000 years. Though the Roman Empire was indeed on the whole religiously and morally "tolerant" and "diverse" - with the exception of insistence on Emperor worship! - it was also religiously and morally confused, socially stratified, brutal, and mired in the depths of the cynicism and despair of a world that was thought to be ruled by "fate". It was only the introduction of the Christian faith into that Empire that brought about individual liberation, a sense of acceptance and equality before God, and a firm hope in the midst of so much despair.

Far from being the oppressive historical religion that multi-cultural historians and atheists have made it out to be, it is simply and clearly a matter of the historical record that the Christian faith when introduced into the Roman Empire produced the exact opposite effect. Any honest history - see histories written at least before the last couple of decades - will make clear this dramatic and world-changing

effect. As an example I quote from the masterly A History of the Modern World - an AP European History textbook - in describing the true historical effects of the Christian faith upon the Roman world:

"It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the coming of Christianity. It brought with it, for one thing, an altogether new sense of human life. Where the Greeks had demonstrated the powers of the mind, the Christians explored the soul [life], and they taught that in the sight of God all souls [lives] were equal, that every human life was sacrosanct and inviolate, and that all worldly distinctions of greatness, beauty, and brilliancy were in the last analysis superficial. Where the Greeks had identified the beautiful and the good, had thought ugliness to be bad, and had shrunk from disease as an imperfection and from everything misshapen as horrible and repulsive, the Christians resolutely saw a spiritual beauty, even in the plainest or most unpleasant exterior and sought out the diseased, the crippled, and the mutilated to give them help. Love, for the ancients, was never quite distinguished from Venus; for the Christians, who held that God was love, it took on deep overtones of sacrifice and compassion. Suffering itself was in a way divine, since God [the Son of God] had also suffered on Cross in human form. A new dignity was thus found for suffering that the world could not cure. At the same time the Christians worked to relieve suffering as none had worked before. They protested against the massacre of prisoners of war, against the mistreatment and degradation of slaves, against the sending of gladiators to kill each other in the arena for another's pleasure. In place of the Greek and pagan self-satisfaction with human accomplishments they taught humility in the face of an almighty Providence, and in the place of proud distinctions between high and low, slave and free, civilized and barbarian, they held that all men and women were alike because all were children of the same God."

"On an intellectual level Christianity also marked a revolution. It was Christianity, not rational philosophy, that dispelled the swarm of greater and lesser gods and goddesses, the blood sacrifices and self-immolation, or the frantic resort to magic, fortune-telling, and divination. The Christians taught that since there was only one God the pagan gods must be lesser demons, and even this idea was gradually given up. The pagan conception of local, tribal, or national gods, disappeared. For all the world there was only one God, one plan of Salvation, and one Providence, and all human beings took their origin from one source. The idea of the world as one thing, a "universe," was thus affirmed with a new depth of meaning. The very intolerance of Christianity (which was new to the ancient world) came from this overwhelming sense of human unity, in which it was thought that all people should have, and deserved to have, the one true and saving religion." (A History of the Modern World, p. 16).

When we think of the true meaning of Christ coming into the world for the salvation of mankind let us always remember that the true Christian faith that was "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude) in the midst of the darkness, confusion, and despair of the Greco-Roman world of the first century was, and continues to be, the only true light that can dispel the darkness of this world in any individual life and in any realm of life in the world today. In sum, it's world-changing effects continue to this day.

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Review of the Newest Edition of the NIV

The newest edition of the New International Version (NIV) is, in my view, an outstanding revision and up-dating of the NIV. It can now be read and/or compared with other versions on-line at: www.biblegateway.com At the same web address one can also read the translators notes about their latest revision along with examples of the choices they made and why. Personally, my only major criticism of the new revision is the decision of the translators to continue to use the "singular they/their/them" rather than the more traditional "generic he/him/his" which is still used and taught in most schools today. This decision will make for some awkward and strange language at times, especially for those who are accustomed to the NIV 1984. As a long-time NIV user I will state openly that this decision is indeed disappointing to me. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that this new edition of the NIV is extremely accurate and clear as to meaning and - in the NIV tradition - it is usually very readable as well. It should be a great help for those who are seeking to know and better understand God's word as revealed in the pages of the Bible. It will now take its place amongst a plethora of excellent English Bible versions that have recently been published within the last two decades including among others: the NRSV, ESV, HCSB, and the NLT. In sum, the new NIV will certainly be able to be used as a main version for those who prefer it and as a second or comparative version for others. Either way it will make a major contribution to the better understanding of God's word and for that we should be thankful - both to God first and foremost, and then, to the dedicated translators of this new edition.

When I think back to what it was like reading the Bible while I was growing up in the 1950s, 60s and 70s I can't help but be thankful for the many excellent English Bible versions that are available today in the English speaking world. I grew up with the King James Version (KJV) and then gradually shifted with my church to the Revised Standard Version (RSV) which had recently been published about the time I was born. The KJV was beautiful language but definitely a struggle to understand. The RSV was much easier to understand but also lost some of the beauty of the KJV. During my teenage years I started to also read newer more modern English versions that were being published. These included the New English Bible (NEB - a version I still love to read with its British English) and Good News for Modern Man (GNB). I pretty much devoured the New Testaments of both of these versions and they helped me greatly to understand the New Testament at a time when I was really intent on understanding its message. Ever since that time I've been appreciative of the variety of English versions of the Bible and I am thankful that they've continued to grow both in number and in quality.

In the mid-1980s I began using the New International Version (NIV) as my primary reading, study, and memorization Bible. It was first published in the 1970s and the revised in 1984. I had already committed vast quantities of the KJV to memory but the NIV was a great advance in both accuracy and readability to the KJV and I knew that it would be helpful for me personally as well as for others. In many ways the NIV revolutionized the world of Bible reading and understanding for English Bible readers. The NIV Study Bible and NIV Student Bible have also easily been the best of their kind and have done so much to help people to understand the message of the Bible. In more recent times other versions have come along that are also excellent English Bible versions both in terms of accuracy and readability. These include the

NRSV, the ESV, the HCSB, the NLT, and the most recent revision of the NIV tradition, the TNIV. Any one of these versions of the Bible could suffice to be a person's main version for regular use and they're also all useful for comparative study. Personally, I recommend them all; however, in my view none of them is any better overall than the NIV for general use. That is also what most English Bible readers apparently have thought since the NIV has continued to be, far and away, the best selling English version of the Bible in the world.

Despite this, about a year ago it was announced that this 1984 edition of the NIV would be revised and replaced by a new edition of the NIV which is to be published in book form in 2011. It was thought, and I agree, that a language and content update was needed. The TNIV which was published in its latest edition in 2005 was an attempt at doing this. However, despite being an excellent translation overall, many of its gender language changes were not accepted by many people including many traditional NIV readers. So for a variety of reasons it was decided to replace both the NIV 1984 and the TNIV with a new single edition of the NIV. As of November 1, 2010 this edition has been published on-line and, therefore, interested readers can already make use of it at bible gateway. At the Bible gateway web-site this version is now labeled NIV 2010; however, it also is sometimes called NIV 2011 in various places since it will be published in book form in the spring of 2011. When it eventually is actually published in book form it will simply be called the NIV.

Over the last week I've spent a great deal of time reading and looking over this latest revision of the NIV. In my view, this new edition of the NIV is a very accurate, and usually, a very readable version of the Bible. However a few things need to be made clear right from the beginning. First the point of departure - or text upon which updates for this new edition has been made - is the text of the TNIV 2005 rather than the text of the NIV 1984. This is important because any update or change in this text must be approved by 70% of the NIV translators for it to appear in the new revision of the NIV. Therefore, this new edition of the NIV is in reality a revision of the TNIV 2005 rather than the NIV 1984. Importantly, however, this new revision will now replace both the NIV 1984 and the TNIV 2005 and will now become the only edition of the NIV that will eventually be sold. Understanding all of this will help the reader to understand the changes that have been made in this new NIV edition and why it differs far more from the NIV 1984 than from the TNIV 2005. In this light let me make a few observations:

1. I would strongly emphasize that about 95% of the text that was in the NIV 1984 and probably 97 % of the text that was in the TNIV 2005 is still the same in this new edition of the NIV. This makes for a great deal of continuity from Genesis to Revelation in this new NIV with its predecessors. Therefore, for the most part when a person reads this new edition he still feels at home in the NIV tradition. The differences between the different editions are small on a quantitative basis and are usually also small on a theological meaning basis. However, the differences that will be apparent to everyone are the gender-language updates in English usage. If you are used to the NIV 1984 then these changes in the new edition of the NIV are likely to seem quite significant. If you are used to the TNIV 2005 then these changes are likely to seem more minor. Unfortunately, since English language usage is so varied throughout the world it is simply impossible to please anybody all the time. In my view, the NIV 1984 reads more naturally than either the TNIV 2005 or the new NIV 2011 in places where certain types of gender-language changes have been made. Nevertheless, this new NIV 2011 is definitely an upgrade in

the accuracy of the meaning of the text from the NIV 1984 and is also an upgrade in gender-language usage from the TNIV 2005. In addition, many of the most obnoxious gender-language changes can be easily "corrected" with one's own pencil or pen so as to make the text read more naturally.

Personally, I will continue to use the (now new) NIV as one of my main Bible versions for regular reading and study. I will also recommend it to others. But I will also continue to use the NIV 1984 at times since I think it sometimes reads more naturally than this new edition. In addition, I will also continue to use many other versions for reading and comparative purposes. On biblegateway.com I normally use three to five different versions next to each other in parallel columns whenever I read the Bible on-line for comparative study purposes. They are: the ESV, NIV, TNIV, HCSB or NLT. These versions give me a nice spectrum of the different translations available in English and they're all excellent versions based on somewhat different translation philosophies and somewhat different, though overlapping, target audiences. I will now replace the TNIV with this new edition of the NIV since this is the latest update by the NIV translators. However, when I just want to read the Bible for myself in the morning, for instance, the version I will use will be any of the above, though the ESV is the one I use most often because it is the most literal, maintains the most continuity with past English versions of the KJV/Tyndale tradition, and is - to my ears - the most beautiful expression of dignified English.

2. Examples: Since there is so much continuity between this new 2010(11) edition of the NIV with its predecessors of the NIV 1984 and the TNIV 2005 I think that the best thing to do is simply give some examples of new updates in this new edition. Here are some non-gender language examples from Paul's "Letter to the Romans" of what I consider to be amongst the better updates in the new NIV 2010(11):

Romans 1:5 reverts to "the obedience that comes from faith" of the NIV 1984 from the "faith and obedience" of the TNIV 2005. This is a good change that emphasizes that Christian obedience springs from faith in Christ.

Romans 1:16 begins now with "For" showing the continuity of thought from v. 15 to v. 16.

Romans 3:20, 28, etc. the NIV 1984's somewhat controversial "observing the law" becomes the more literal "the works of the law." I actually prefer "observing the law"; however, the more literal "works of the law" will make this more acceptable in many circles due to debates springing from the so-called New Perspective on Paul. The meaning, however, is exactly the same so the more literal "works of the law" seems to be the best choice.

Romans 3:25 "justice" of both the NIV 1984 and TNIV becomes "righteousness" in the new NIV which maintains the proper context of "the righteousness of God".

Romans 8 and in many other places, "sinful nature" becomes "flesh" together with an outstanding footnote about this in Romans 8. "Sinful nature" (or other context oriented translations) is still retained in some places in Paul's letters including a couple of times in Romans 7 but usually the Greek *sarx* is now translated "flesh". This is a much debated and (in my view) welcome change, especially with the excellent footnote in Romans 8 (and in other places) that explains it.

Romans 8:6 gets my vote as the single best updated verse. It becomes

"The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace."

This is an outstanding translation and a great improvement over earlier editions which implied that the Spirit "controlled" a believer's mind!

Romans 12:1 becomes "this is your true and proper worship" - very nicely stating a difficult text to translate.

Romans 16:25-27 is an outstanding upgrade in translation in the new NIV and includes the new upgrade of "obedience that comes from faith" rather than "faith and obedience" of the TNIV, thus maintaining consistency with 1:5.

I could keep going through the NT Letters like this but this is enough to give the reader a feel for the type of changes that have been made. I would note also that I read straight through I and II Timothy and Titus and found the new NIV version to be outstanding all the way through with only minor changes. One particularly good upgrade was the change to "the servant of God" from "all God's people" (TNIV) in II Timothy 3:17. In my view, of course, the traditional "man of God" would be even better.

3. For the most part, the only changes that I've seen so far that I don't like have to do with changes - or non-changes - from the TNIV 2005 to this new edition of the NIV 2010(11) with respect to gender-language translations and updates. This, of course, is no surprise given that I consider many of the changes in gender-language usage as: (1) needless - since traditional English usage was already "gender accurate" or "gender-inclusive" if properly taught and understood without biases; (2) often causing more confusion in their own right than that which they seek to correct; and, (3) not only pandering to political correctness but also actually often being "offensive" to many godly people of traditional values who were brought up to speak English in a more traditional way. Of course, in the world of political correctness "offensiveness" seems to only be considered valid if it goes in one direction.

Nevertheless, quite a few of the gender-language translations carried over from the TNIV are certainly good such as using "person" for "man" in various places such as Rom. 3:28, 5:7, etc. However, the decision by the translators to continue to use - and to even expand the use of - the "singular they/their/them" instead of using the traditional and more grammatical "generic he/him/his", etc. makes for very awkward and strange English at times. This will also make this new NIV version unacceptable as a main version to many faithful Bible readers - including many who are faithful readers of the NIV 1984 and who were promised in the late 1990s and then again only a few years ago that the NIV 1984 text would never be changed and would continue to be published as such. Given the promises made to these readers over the years it borders on the unethical to not continue to publish in some format the NIV 1984 for those who prefer it.

The NIV 1984 is still the best selling English version of the Bible in the world. There are over 400 million of them in print. Millions of the readers of this version rejected the TNIV and stuck with the NIV because it is a translation that communicates truth in a simple and clear language that they understand. The

decision to expand the use of the "singular they/their/them" and at the same time to discontinue the NIV 1984 is almost a slap in the face to these people. It is as if the translators think that they know better than what the market itself clearly shows when one compares the sales of the NIV 1984 with the TNIV 2005. The translators, of course, insist that this type of gender-language usage is now the way English speakers around the globe overwhelmingly speak. They also attempt to back this up with various statistical and language studies. However, the "generic he/him/his" can be, and has been, equally well defended. Most schools still teach this form of English and the idea that it is only "a few" or "English purists" (both terms being used dismissively) who resist changes away from traditional English usage is simply nonsense. Most people will, of course, simply decide this issue for themselves based on how natural the language reads to them, especially in the light of how they were taught to speak/write English as they were growing up and in the light of the language they are used to encountering in the books and Bible versions they read. So, as with the TNIV, we'll see how this language is actually accepted by the Bible reading public. Most likely its acceptance will be varied depending on where people live in the English speaking world, the churches and/or Bible fellowships they attend, and the circles in which they move in their daily lives.

Here are a few examples of gender-language updates in the new NIV:

a. Genesis 1:26 has now become "mankind" rather than "human beings" (TNIV) or "man" (NIV 1984). Personally, I think this is a good update but I'm sure it will be controversial from both ends of the gender-language spectrum. All three possible translations are equally accurate and no single translation would appeal to everyone.

b. Genesis 6:1ff reads a little more clearly than in the TNIV, but still somewhat strangely. The NIV 1984 sounds most natural.

c. Psalm 1:

I quote and then will comment:

1 "Blessed is the one

who does not walk in step with the wicked

or stand in the way that sinners take

or sit in the company of mockers,

2 but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,

and who meditates on his law day and night.

3 That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,

which yields its fruit in season

and whose leaf does not wither—

whatever they do prospers."

This translation of this cherished Psalm is generally accurate and understandable and it is probably also an improvement on the TNIV translation. Indeed, as my good friend Scot Hahn says, it is "no worse" than any of the other modern versions! :) However, the English is obviously forced and awkward. It is quite clear to any reader familiar with the Bible that the translators are trying to not have to use either "man" or the "generic he/his/him" throughout the Psalm even though that is a good way to have the Psalm sound and communicate accurately as it did to its original audience - and, as it traditionally has done to English audiences in the KJV, RSV and NIV for centuries and decades. I have highlighted the places where this avoidance is taking place. Every single person whom I've heard comment on this new translation of Psalm 1 in the last few days has said the exact same thing about the awkwardness of the language - independently of each other.

I really don't understand what the problem is here. The NIV is supposed to be a functionally equivalent or dynamically equivalent translation. The idea is to reproduce the same understanding and impression in English as the original language did to the original readers. But the Psalms were poetic and were produced to be sung in worship. Who can say that about this translation of Psalm 1? The original NIV 1984 is easily the most natural (and traditional) reading and the one that should still stand. The NIV 1984 version is known, cherished and memorized by millions of faithful Christians around the world. Why change it? Every other translation has its own problems. Fortunately, it is easy enough to "correct" this new translation with one's own pencil or pen in one's own Bible so as to make it read like more normal, natural English. I can only hope that the outcry against this particular translation of this beautiful and cherished Psalm will be so great that the translators will soon revise it back to the natural reading of the NIV 1984. Until then, as I've said above, it is at least accurate and understandable - and, correctable!

d. Psalm 8: this is a good update with the strange and awkward "mortals" (TNIV) being thrown out in favor of "mankind" and/or "human beings".

e. Psalm 15 is an improvement on the TNIV; however, it is still very awkward in trying to avoid the "generic he/him/his" and replacing these with the "singular they/their/them".

f. Psalm 112 is still pluralized throughout which seems to contradict what is said in the translators notes about having deleted pluralizing language which was abundant in the TNIV. The translation of this Psalm, thus, remains the same as the TNIV and is much more awkward than the more natural translation of the NIV 1984.

g. Micah 6:8 in the new NIV says "He has shown you, o mortal, what is good ..." This is very strange English. Again, front and center is the fear of using "man" and thus the resort to awkward and strange English. I don't know of a single English speaking person who would use "mortal" in such a context.

h. The "generic he/him/his" is still occasionally used in this new edition of the NIV. Ironically, one example is Psalm 14:1:

The new NIV says "The fool says in his heart, there is no God." This is a return to the NIV 1984 and is a good translation.

The TNIV had pluralized it to say "Fools say in their hearts..." so as to avoid the generic "his".

Given the prevalence of their use of the "singular they" one would think that the translators of the new NIV 2010(11) would use the "singular they" here as they do in almost all other contexts and read,

"The fool says in their heart..."

But, apparently, it is acceptable according political correctness to assume in this context that only males can be fools - thus, the acceptable retention of the "his"! :)

There are many other uses of gender-neutral language throughout the new NIV. Sometimes they're a problem for me and sometimes they're not. Sometimes they cause me dissonance as I read and I have to stop and figure out what is being said, usually because there is a disagreement between pronoun and antecedent noun in number. At other times the changes seem relatively natural. Occasionally, they seem to stick out like a sore thumb. I certainly respect the expertise of the translators of the NIV; however, I also know that for the most part they work in universities and seminaries - the main bastions of politically correct language. The language that is spoken there is certainly not representative of how the general English speaking population speaks or - irrespective of how it is spoken at times colloquially - expects English to be written and understood.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize again that in most ways I believe that this new edition of the NIV 2010(11) is an outstanding translation of the Bible that will be very useful in reading, studying and sharing God's word. It will surely find its niche among the many other Bible versions that are available. How much acceptance will it find? Will it become as popular as the NIV 1984? Only time will tell. In particular, if traditional NIV users don't accept it because of its gender-language changes who is going to recommend it to others? Nevertheless, as I've stated above, it will certainly be one of the main versions that I will personally use and I will also recommend it to others - at least as a comparative version for study purposes, if not as a main version for regular use. However, I also hope that the translators will remain open to future updates based on feedback from sincere believers who care deeply about a Bible version that has long been dear to them - and, who twice were promised that there would be no changes to that version.

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The NIV 2011 Edition On-line

As many of you know I've long been a strong advocate of the NIV/TNIV as one of the best and most useful Bible versions in the English speaking world. No other English translation has done a better job of combining biblical accuracy in translation with readability for the common man. About two weeks ago Biblica, the organization which sponsors the NIV, announced that the new NIV 2011 edition would be made available on-line beginning November 1. This is several months before it will be published in book form, coming out sometime around spring. To say the least, this is good news! The NIV has been the best selling English Bible in the world for many years and it has been in need of an update for some time. The TNIV was an update that was published in 2001 and then again in 2005. Though popular in many circles, the TNIV was highly unpopular in others. In particular, many long-time users of the NIV thought the TNIV went too far in its gender-language updates. Because many, if not most, NIV long-time users kept using, buying, and recommending the NIV instead of the TNIV. Biblica ultimately made the decision in the summer of 2009 to make a new 2011 edition of the NIV that would replace both the current NIV 1984 edition as well as the TNIV.

It will, of course, be impossible for the NIV Bible translators to please everyone - including me - with all of its translation choices, especially since English is simply too varied a language in how it is used throughout the world. Nevertheless, I feel almost certain that the NIV 2011 edition will be a version that will represent amongst the best in current biblical scholarship as well as in dynamic equivalency translation faithfulness into the English language. It is unlikely that there will be many major changes in the translation from previous editions and the likelihood is that there will be a relative balance between the best of the NIV 1984 and the TNIV 2005. If that is the case the new NIV will continue to be one of the most useful English versions of the Bible in the world today.

I will look forward to blogging about this new NIV 2011 edition in the weeks ahead. However, let us all give the translators the benefit of the doubt even when we differ on certain translation decisions and English usage. When used together with other more literal translations (e.g. ESV) and more free translations (e.g. NLT) this new edition of the NIV will surely enrich the resources that English speaking Christians have for personal Bible reading, study, and outreach. Let us enjoy this new Bible resource and use it for the promotion of God's purposes in the world.

The NIV 2011 can be accessed at the Bible Gateway web-site in our right hand margin column or simply: www.BibleGateway.com

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God and Government: Main Principles

As the last post on this topic of "God and Government" I think it might be useful to set out a brief summary of the main principles that we have discussed in previous posts. I hope this will be useful to those interested in this subject.

1. God is the Creator, Sovereign Ruler, and Ultimate Judge of all that takes place in the heavens and earth. He created the universe with a plan in mind, he has been working in history since the creation to bring that plan to pass, and he will ultimately achieve that plan according to his own purposes and will. (e.g. Gen. 1:1ff; Psalm 103:19; Eph. 1:3-14).

2. Mankind was created in the image of God to rule over God's earth on his behalf. Man is responsible to live a godly life as one created in God's image by loving God and by loving one's neighbor as oneself in accordance with God's standards of holiness, righteousness and justice. Man has freedom of will to do this and is thus accountable to God and subject to God's rule and judgment of the world. This will culminate in God's final judgment of the world after Christ's return.

3. Given the sinfulness of mankind, God has ordained human government as a means of repressing, deterring, and punishing evil as well as for the promoting the common good of mankind. In doing this government helps in achieving God's purposes in this world. Though there is no particular form of government that the Bible sets forth as being the best form in this present evil age, all governments are responsible to God for carrying out and promoting righteousness, justice and mercy in relation to their citizens, subjects, or residents. To the degree that it does not carry out these God-ordained purposes government loses its legitimacy in terms of it being an agency via which God's righteousness, justice and mercy can be achieved; however, God himself can still work in and through such governments in achieving his ultimate purposes for mankind.

4. Since government is ordained by God mankind is expected to be subject to it and to support it as a God-ordained human institution that is set-up for the benefit of mankind. Therefore, government institutions and laws should be obeyed unless there is a clear conflict with obeying God. When that occurs the Bible is clear from Genesis to Revelation that mankind's responsibility is "to obey God rather than man."

5. Since government is viewed as a God-ordained institution for the benefit of mankind the work of government is also viewed as godly and in accordance with God's own over-arching governance of the world. There is a clear distinction in the Bible - both OT and NT - between mankind's responsibility towards his neighbor in inter-personal relations within society vs. government's God-ordained responsibilities as an institution in regards to the making, administering, and upholding of societies' laws for the benefit and protection of society as a whole. So, for instance, the individual in normal personal and societal relations is not to avenge himself; however, governmental agents are specifically assigned this role in order to protect society and punish and deter evil. In short, the Bible speaks of the role of governmental law and of government agents in the highest possible terms. Just laws are viewed as necessary, proper, and in accordance with God's plan for mankind. Governmental agents are viewed as the upholders of God's justice in this world - without which evil would flourish.

6. Because of this godly nature of governmental service believers themselves - who are even now citizens of God's kingdom in heaven - are still commanded to pay taxes to support government and to honor those who carry out its duties. In addition, believers themselves ethically can, historically have, currently do, and certainly should participate in government's positions, functions, and duties. This would include every aspect of just government including the use of force as necessary and irrespective of the historical period, form of government, or the imperfections that are a part of any human institution. As in all cases of biblical understanding and application believers must endeavor to understand the original intent and meaning of these biblical principles and then apply them with wisdom to their own unique situations in the times and places in which they live - not as legal commands, but in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

7. In conclusion, there is a consistency in the biblical view of government from Genesis to Revelation. Government is a temporary and partial means by which God brings a measure of peace, justice and order to the world in the midst of this present evil age. This will continue until the time when God intervenes in the world through Christ's second coming to bring about a final judgment of the world and then to usher in the new and everlasting age of the kingdom of God in a new heavens and earth. Only then will God's kingdom fully come and God's will be fully done, "on earth as it is in heaven."

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God and Government: The Biblical Mandate for the Governmental Use of Violent Force on Behalf of Justice

The Bible is clear that eternal life in the future kingdom of God is the true hope of the Christian believer and, whether recognized or not, the only true hope for the resolution of the problems of mankind in this world. Christian believers are even now citizens of that kingdom which is now in heaven and, via the gift of the Spirit, have a down payment of the life of that future age even while living in the midst of this present evil age. The mission of the Christian church is to proclaim the good news of participating in that coming kingdom by way of believing in Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God who died for the sins of mankind and who was raised from the dead by God. Ultimately, the future kingdom of God will be ushered in only by the personal return in power and glory of Christ himself. In sum, it is not the efforts of man that will bring about God's kingdom but rather the divine intervention of God himself by way of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Throughout history, since the time of Christ's ministry on earth in the first century there has been a good deal of confusion about the kingdom of God. In particular, one of the major errors has been the idea that the kingdom of God can be established on earth via the efforts of man himself. The church as a whole has at times fallen victim to this idea. Eventually, a theology developed called post-millennialism

that taught that Christ would return to earth after the church built the kingdom of God on earth. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries this theology became highly influential in combination with 19th century ideas of progress and the movement of societies towards an ultimate utopia in which peace on earth would reign. This theology and philosophy mixed well with social Darwinism and imperialism of the times. Two American Presidents who adhered to postmillennialism to a greater or lesser degree were Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. However, the hopes of post-millennialists along with many other 19th century delusions were blown apart in the Great War of 1914 - 18. Roosevelt and Wilson were both highly moral Christian men who made many great contributions to American society; however, the post-millennial views contributed at times to unrealistic thinking on both of their parts as seen, in particular, by Wilson's slogans of WWI being "the War to End all Wars" and "the War to Make the World Safe for Democracy". As with most people their ideas were fluid and changing but post-millennialism was part of the mix that produced some of their more utopian ideas.

The Bible, on the other hand, from Genesis to Revelation is anything but utopian. It is open, honest, pointed and clear about human nature, the bondage of sin, and the reality of evil. Nowhere does the Bible ever pretend that mankind can solve these problems. Instead, government is ordained and instituted as a temporary, though important, means of restraining evil until the time when God intervenes in the affairs of mankind to establish his kingdom in a new heavens and earth. This will only occur as the result of the second coming of Christ which will take place at a time in the future that only God knows. The Bible is also clear that the Christian church is to proclaim the good news of this coming kingdom. However, neither the church - nor government on behalf of the church - is to use the weapons of human warfare to try to establish God's kingdom on earth (John 18:36; Eph. 6:10f; II Cor. 10:1f). Instead, the light of that kingdom is made known through the fruit of the Spirit in believers lives and the good news of that coming kingdom is proclaimed by believers by both their words and deeds to the world.

Nevertheless, the kingdom of God itself is not yet here. Believers do not yet reign and yet they still live in this world. Marriage still takes place. Children still are born. People work and strive to make a living and human societies are built to support the multi-faceted spectrum of life. Believers live within these societies and must deal with and participate in the realities of human society. This includes human government - government ordained by God himself - including the realities and means that are necessary to bring about effective government according to God's standards. For those who are willing to look at the full biblical picture there can be little doubt that the Bible includes as part of just government the proper use by government of violent force, as necessary, on behalf of justice. There are numerous examples of this both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. In short, coercion - based on the potential or actual governmental use of violence on behalf of justice - is part of the foundation upon which human government and human society must rest in this present evil age. Romans 13:1-7 - which is the central biblical passage on the subject - is unflinchingly bold and clear on this topic:

13:1 "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3 For rulers are not a terror to

good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, 4 for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 7 Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed." (ESV).

Verse 4 states as clearly as it is possible to state it that the governmental authority who is ordained by God (v. 1) is:

- a. one who is "God's servant for your good"
- b. one who "does not bear the sword in vain"
- c. one who is "an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer"

Verse 6 then clearly states that taxes are to be paid - by believers and unbelievers alike - for the specific purpose of enabling the governmental authorities to "attend to this very thing".

Surely, no honest reading of this passage can dispute the God-ordained role of government to use force (violence), as necessary, against wrongdoers in the pursuit of justice. Surely, no honest reading of this passage can dispute that it is the responsibility, not only of unbelievers, but of believers as well, to pay taxes so that governmental authorities can carry out their God-appointed duties, including the use of violent force, on behalf of justice. It must be emphasized that, when properly understood, there is not one word in the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation that contradicts this view.

Of course, man's relationship with God and his fellowman is one of the chief topics of the Bible right from the start in Genesis chapter 1. Both in the Old and New Testaments the individual believer is to:

- a. Love God with all one's heart, soul, mind and strength
- b. Love one's neighbor as oneself

This is implied from the start in Genesis, specifically taught in the OT Mosaic Law, and then confirmed by Christ and the NT writers. Christ taught that the whole Mosaic Law rests on the foundation of those two commandments (Matt. 22; Mark 12, etc.) and the same two commandments continue as the basis for godly living throughout the rest of the NT (Rom. 12 & 13; Gal. 5; James 2, etc.). In short, in both the Old and New Testaments these two greatest commandments set the foundation for all other ethical principles. However, the principles of loving God and loving one's neighbor do not nullify the need for government. Instead, those principles demand the necessity of having government because only proper government - including its use of force - can protect individuals in society in the midst of an evil age. There are different spheres or roles within life and society which modify, qualify, or build upon the general ethical principles of the Bible that are set out for all. Thus, in general society, in one's personal

relations with others one endeavors to overcome evil with good, to not avenge oneself, and to live in a way that upholds truth, biblical morals, and the common good of society. Examples of such general biblical ethical teaching would be Lev. 19 in the OT and Romans 12 in the NT - from among many others.

In one's family relations, however, there is a unique and proper order to honoring one's parents, to the marriage of a husband and wife, and to the raising of children, etc. that is specific to family relations. There are specific obligations within these relationships that do not hold for one's obligations to one's neighbor in society as a whole. In society in general one does not always, or even normally, correct or punish one's neighbor for slights, discourteous actions, or even for most non-violent grievances against oneself. Instead, one normally endeavors to overcome evil with good and corrections, etc. would be dependent upon the situations and relations of that particular societal order. There are, however, specific duties of children to parents, of husband to wife and wife to husband, of parents to children, etc. that modify or qualify or build upon one's basic obligations to one's neighbor in society as a whole. One honors one's parents in a way that is greater than how one honors one's neighbor in society in general. One is to have sexual relations with one's spouse as part of a marriage relationship - something that is specifically forbidden throughout the Bible with someone outside of that relationship. And, one teaches, corrects, punishes, and nurtures one's children in a way that is specific to that relationship. For a parent to allow slights, discourteous actions, and any type of disobedience by one's children on the basis of the biblical statements such as "do not avenge yourselves" or "do not repay evil with evil" or "overcome evil with good" would be a gross misapplication of general biblical principles meant for normal societal relations - but which are modified by specific parental responsibilities to train up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Another specific role or sphere of life in which special requirements apply to the relationships relates to role of governmental relations in society. Whereas believers in general relations with their neighbors in society are to love their neighbors as themselves, to do to others what you would have them to do you, to not avenge themselves, to not repay evil for evil, but; instead, to overcome evil with good - government, on the other hand, has a specific role defined by God to both do good and to suppress, punish and deter evil. In this relationship government is even authorized and expected to use violence as necessary in order to bring about the justice and order necessary for human society in this present evil age. Believers are specifically told to submit to this governmental role, to pay taxes for the god-ordained role that it performs and to show special respect and honor for those who undertake these god-ordained duties. Given that these are godly activities that are ordained by God himself and that believers are commanded to support the governmental authorities who perform these duties, it would be the height of hypocrisy to say that believers themselves could not or should not serve in the role of governmental authorities because these authorities carry out duties that believers are expressly forbidden to undertake such as "love your neighbor as yourself", "do not avenge yourselves", "do not repay anyone evil for evil", etc.

Unfortunately, however, this is precisely the position taken by believers who teach that the NT prohibits the Christian believer from using violent force even in governmental positions. This point of view is usually based on interpreting the Sermon on the Mount as a new set of laws - that is, legalisms to be followed according to the letter - set forth by Christ rather than as correcting the misunderstanding or

misapplication of principles of truth set out in the Mosaic Law. In fact, this truth as set forth by Christ was meant to be understood in the light of the OT prophetic statements such as God requiring his people "to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:6f). Jesus goes on to confirm, illustrate and teach these principles throughout the Gospels (Matt. 9:13, 12:7, 18:33; 23:23). In no way was Jesus doing away with the ethical teaching of the OT Law. The teaching of Romans chapters 12 & 13 - understood together in their own context - confirms the same OT position that believers have general societal obligations to love their neighbors including not to avenge themselves while at the same time it is precisely the role of government to do just that - as the avenger of God against the wrongdoer (Ex. 20-23; Lev. 17-19; Rom. 12-13). To take the position that Christian believers are prohibited from serving in secular positions of governmental authority where violence must be used is to confuse the general societal obligations of believers in regards to their neighbors with the specific spheres or roles in society that have their own specific obligations and requirements and thus modify, qualify or build upon, the general societal obligations inherent in the ethical obligation to "love your neighbor as yourself." The reason for this governmental role is so that individuals can fulfill their general societal obligations - both working together for the good of society as a whole.

This common confusion about societal roles or spheres is a "category mistake" in the exact same way as it would be to say that a parent cannot punish his child with spanking, etc. because that would conflict with the statements to "love your neighbor as yourself", "do to others as you would have them do to you", "do not avenge yourselves" or "do not repay evil with evil". But this ignores the fact that it is certainly no love for one's neighbor to let your child run wild causing havoc to society. Nor is it love for one's neighbor to allow your neighbor to be robbed, raped or murdered by criminals. Nor is it love for one's neighbor to allow a country to be attacked and taken over by a brutal totalitarian government. Government is ordained by God and believers ethically can, historically have, currently do, and certainly should participate in it - as with all other aspects, roles, or spheres of life - so long as that particular governmental service is being conducted in accordance with the general principles of Romans 13:1-7. There are a huge number biblical examples - both in the OT and NT - in which believers (or those who become believers) - serve in various governmental positions.

Tellingly, not once in the Bible is a believer - or convert to Christ - ever told to resign his government position on the basis of that position being inherently evil nor is there ever even the slightest hint that governmental service is somehow "unclean" for a believer to participate in. Instead, the glowing portrayal of governmental service laid down in Romans 13:1-7 puts governmental service, if anything, on a pedestal as a profession that in and of itself is doing God's work in a unique, special and necessary way for the good of society - so long as it is in accordance with principles of Romans 13:1-7 itself. Just government is godly and it requires the use of violent force, as necessary, if it is to be effective. This certainly includes police work on its many levels according to the given society and it also extends to the concept of just war since the only alternative would be for a government to allow the wholesale promulgation of evil and injustice that government is itself ordained by God to prevent, suppress and punish. Arguably, two of the greatest evils that mankind can be faced with are brutal totalitarian government at one extreme and total anarchy at the other extreme. Proper, just, and orderly government is a great good in this world and is one of the greatest possible barriers to the promulgation

of evil. Because of that believers are specifically commanded to pray for their governmental leaders so that as believers they can lead "quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and honesty" and, in the process, help carry out God's purposes of bringing the knowledge of the one true God and his salvation through Christ to the world (I Tim. 2:1-7).

But the Bible is also the most realistic of all books. Mankind is far from perfect. Therefore no human governmental system or legal system is, or will be, perfect; and, the pursuit of justice in police work, in a legal system, or in war will also never be perfect. But this is all the more reason why modern participatory democracies have a greater responsibility in making their political, legal, and defense systems as just as possible. It is also all the more reason why those - such as believers - who believe in justice should participate to a greater or lesser degree in the system according to their own callings, abilities, and situations in life. Even voting is a major participation and opportunity for promoting good that was not available for most of mankind during human history.

Finally, when government becomes on the whole unjust or when it moves towards totalitarian control or towards anarchy there are no specific biblical instructions as what to do. Of course, the believer's basic responsibilities of loving God and loving his neighbor remain the same. And, if living in this godly way brings persecution since there is no protection from an unjust or broken legal system then the believer is left with the general biblical principle that it is honorable to suffer for doing what is just and that God's justice and the believer's reward for righteous living will ultimately be accomplished in God's purposes and according to God's timetable. If, however, the believer lives in a society and historical situation in which he can help restore or bring about a more just governmental system then it seems to follow that this would be a godly and responsible thing to do. Nowhere does the Bible praise suffering simply for the sake of suffering. It is suffering for righteousness sake that the Bible praises. Paul himself suffered persecution often; however, as a Roman citizen he also demanded and expected that his rights as a Roman citizen be respected and upheld. He did not simply passively acquiesce in the face of injustice. In the same way believers should demand and expect that their rights within modern governments be upheld. Arguably, they should also participate in whatever way appropriate to them to make their societies more just. To not participate in righting an unjust society when it is possible to do so seems to be against the whole tenor of both the Old and New Testaments. This could be true of any number of historical governmental systems but it is perhaps especially true that those who live in participatory representative democracies have a special obligation to strive for just societies since they have legal rights in helping to do so.

There are, of course, many other specific roles or spheres of life in which relationships have their own specific requirements that modify or qualify or build upon those ethical principles that the Bible sets out for one's relationship to one's neighbor in society as a whole. In ancient society this would have included master to servant and servant to master relationships - something that rarely exists today in the same way as existed then. As societies change the different types of relationships that are inherent in societies change. Believers must be able to understand the biblical principles of the OT and, especially, the NT in their original contexts and then to apply those principles - not legalisms - in new ways to the situations of today. This becomes a life of growing and maturing in Christ and thus learning to live in a Christ-like lifestyle: that is, "in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code"

(Rom. 7:6). In other words, by living as Christ lived and living as Paul and the other NT believers lived within the real-life situations and historical circumstances of their lives as they sought to bring the good news of God's salvation to the world by way of their every thought, word and deed.

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June 14, 2010

God and Government: The Governance of Man as Ordained by God

The Classic statement of the biblical view of proper God-ordained government is found in Romans 13:1-7:

13:1 "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, 4 for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 7 Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed." (ESV).

This simple and direct exposition by Paul is consistent with the biblical view from Genesis to Revelation and continues to set forth the God-ordained purpose and view of proper government for today. It is built on the God-ordained view of government set forth throughout the Old Testament (e.g. Gen. 1:26-28; Dan. 2:21, 4:17) and is supported also by Christ himself (e.g. John 19:11) and the rest of the NT writers (e.g. I Peter 2:13-14; Titus 3:1). No faithful Jewish or Christian believer would have ever considered that God did not rule the world or that human government was not ordained by him and responsible to him. Those were "givens" or fundamental "assumptions" of the biblical world view of any faithful believer whether in the OT or NT era. This can be seen even in the non-canonical inter-testamental book of the Wisdom of Solomon:

"Listen therefore, O kings, and understand; learn, O judges of the ends of the earth. Give ear, you that rule over multitudes, and boast of many nations; For your dominion was given you from the Lord and your sovereignty from the Most High; he will search out your works and inquire into your plans. Because as servants of his kingdom you did not rule rightly, or keep the law, or walk according to the purpose of God, he will come upon you terribly and swiftly, because severe judgment falls on those in high places. For the lowliest may be pardoned in mercy, but the mighty will be mightily tested. For the Lord of all will

not stand in awe of anyone, or show deference to greatness, because he himself made both small and great, and he takes thought for all alike." (Wisdom of Solomon 6:1-7, NRSV).

This passage from the Wisdom of Solomon shows the implicit and necessary qualifications to the more direct statements of Romans 13 that would have been clear to any faithful believer of the Old or New Testament eras. In accordance with the Semitic way of speaking Paul sets forth the teaching of Romans 13:1-7 in direct statements of absolutes and leaves it to the reader to understand the necessary and implicit qualifications in the light of the Bible as a whole. Clear statements that qualify Romans 13:1-7 such as "we must obey God rather than men" - if there was a conflict between man's law and God's will - would have been obvious to believers of both the Old Testament and New Testament as abundant examples from Genesis to Revelation show (e.g. Daniel 3, 6; Acts 4:18-20; Rev. 1ff). Given the vast number of biblical examples available to them from the OT, the implicit qualifying principles such as always putting God first did not need to always be spelled out - they were simply givens or fundamental assumptions of the biblical world-view that any faithful believer would have recognized.

Romans 13:1-7 sets forth in clear terms the purposes of God-ordained government and man's (believers and non-believers alike) proper relationship and responsibilities to it. However, it is a biblical "given" that government is responsible to govern justly by providing for the common good and by punishing, suppressing and deterring evil. When government does not consistently fulfill its God-given responsibilities the believer must look to other biblical principles and to God himself as to how to act in any given situation. Both the Old Testament and New Testament counsel a consistent lifestyle of overcoming evil with good along with not taking personal vengeance or repaying evil with evil. Instead, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament vengeance is left to God and God has ordained that this vengeance be executed through his God-ordained governmental agents who are specifically appointed to attend to this matter for the good of society as a whole. When such government breaks down - as has happened so often in history - man (believers and non-believers alike) must determine the proper course of action to restore government to its proper function; or if that is not possible, how to best live within the context of an unjust and repressive society until, in God's providence, the possibility for change again exists.

The Bible, thankfully, is loaded with examples of believers living under any number of different governmental situations from which we can learn. Their responsibilities and responses to their governmental situations varied. What always remained - and remains - the same is the believer's view that God providentially rules and judges the world, that God-ordained government is ordained to be just, and that the believer's first and foremost responsibility is to live for God himself. All else - e.g. to what extent to participate in a representative democracy, to what extent to resist in an oppressive society, etc. - can only be determined by those who live in those particular situations. To limit, as some would do, the believers response to un-just government to options such as nonresistant quietism, non-violent civil disobedience, or, in time of war, to pacifism, etc. is to misunderstand and misrepresent the role of believers in the biblical scheme of God-ordained government within the light of God's over-arching purposes and plans for the world. But, we will have to wait and deal more with that topic in our next post.

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June 14, 2010

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Romans 13:1-7 sets forth in clear terms the purposes of God-ordained government and man's (believers and non-believers alike) proper relationship and responsibilities to it. However, it is a biblical "given" that government is responsible to govern justly by providing for the common good and by punishing, suppressing and deterring evil. When government does not consistently fulfill its God-given responsibilities the believer must look to other biblical principles and to God himself as to how to act in any given situation. Both the Old Testament and New Testament counsel a consistent lifestyle of overcoming evil with good along with not taking personal vengeance or repaying evil with evil. Instead, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament vengeance is left to God and God has ordained that this vengeance be executed through his God-ordained governmental agents who are specifically appointed to attend to this matter for the good of society as a whole. When such government breaks down - as has happened so often in history - man (believers and non-believers alike) must determine the proper course of action to restore government to its proper function; or if that is not possible, how to best live within the context of an unjust and repressive society until, in God's providence, the possibility for change again exists.

The Bible, thankfully, is loaded with examples of believers living under any number of different governmental situations from which we can learn. Their responsibilities and responses to their governmental situations varied. What always remained - and remains - the same is the believer's view that God providentially rules and judges the world, that God-ordained government is ordained to be just, and that the believer's first and foremost responsibility is to live for God himself. All else - e.g. to what extent to participate in a representative democracy, to what extent to resist in an oppressive society, etc. - can only be determined by those who live in those particular situations. To limit, as some would do, the believers response to un-just government to options such as nonresistant quietism, non-violent civil disobedience, or, in time of war, to pacifism, etc. is to misunderstand and misrepresent the role of believers in the biblical scheme of God-ordained government within the light of God's over-arching purposes and plans for the world. But, we will have to wait and deal more with that topic in our next post.

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May 31, 2010

God and Government: God's Governance of the World

In the Bible - both in the OT and the NT - it is stated and assumed throughout that God rules over the world. The classic statement of this is in Psalm 103:19:

"The LORD has established his throne in heaven and his kingdom rules over all."

God's wise and just governance of the world - that is, God's "providence" - has two sides. First, the good, orderly, and inter-connected world which God has created, which he governs on an on-going basis, and which provides all that mankind - created in God's image - needs for a godly life on earth (Gen. 1; Psalm 8; Acts 14, 17, Rom. 1:18-20, etc.). Second, God's governance of the world also includes his punishment of sin and evil. In short, vengeance - carried out in various ways including via God's human agents - ultimately belongs to God alone (Lev. 19:18; Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19). God will reward good and he will also repay with just punishment those who practice sin in disobedience to his will. This will ultimately take place in full at the time of the final judgment on "the day of God's wrath." (Rom. 2:5-11; II Thess. 1:5-10).

Of course, this truth of God's providential rule of the world does not always accord well with modern day human thinking with respect to human beings' place in the world, their own human determination of rights and wrongs, and their own conception of human - rather than God-given - rights. Biblically, however, this vengeance of God against his disobedient creatures is based on the truth that God is the creator and human beings are actually creatures of God - not accidental products of chance and evolution - who are responsible to live according to God's will. Therefore, despite "the riches of God's kindness, forbearance and patience" in waiting for people to come to repentance, the day of God's wrath will ultimately come upon those who harden their hearts against God. (Rom. 2:4; II Pet. 3:8-10).

Nevertheless, God's vengeance is not completely left to the final judgment. Throughout history God has exerted his judgment and vengeance in a partial way in his providential governance of the world by various means. This includes, for example, the Noahic flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by fire and brimstone, the various plagues against Egypt including via the destroying angel, the partial destruction of the Canaanites by the Israelites, the punishment and exile of the Israelites and Judeans via the Assyrians and then Babylonians, and finally the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem via the Romans in c. 70 A.D.

There are, of course, many more examples that could be given and all of them show God's continual involvement in the governance of the world since the time of creation. There is also no good reason to think that God has ceased his active governance of the world even if we no longer have direct biblical inspiration to enlighten us about such situations as they occur. For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear God's governance of the world becomes more and more evident the longer one lives as do the

corresponding limitations of human beings to govern themselves well and to wholly solve their own problems.

Nevertheless, despite human limitations, God has appointed human beings the God-given authority, right and responsibility to govern themselves as an on-going extension of God's own governance of the world. This is evident from the original creation of man in God's image to rule over the earth and continues from Genesis to Revelation in the Bible. There is no set single prescribed form of government; instead, what is important is that rulers govern justly on God's behalf. This governance includes two basic aspects as set forth in the Bible's clearest exposition of the purpose of government in Romans 13:1-7:

(1) Promoting the common good of just society.

(2) Punishing, restraining, and deterring evil.

The forms of government in the Bible in which believers themselves hold positions or participate include among others: tribal government (Abraham and the OT Patriarchs, Job, etc.); tribal government within over-arching empires (Abraham and the OT Patriarchs); theocracy under Moses/Joshua/Judges (Israel in the wilderness and promised land); theocratic kingdoms (Israel and Israel/Judah under rulers such as David, etc.); Pagan empires of the OT (Joseph in Egypt, Israel/Judah in captivity with examples such as Daniel, etc.); Israel in return to the land of Israel under the leadership of Nehemiah while still under the rule of Persia; the pagan Roman Empire of the NT with various local forms of rule still allowed under Rome (Israel and the new covenant Church).

In all of these forms of government - both OT and NT - the rulers were considered to be ultimately subject to God and also "God-ordained" according to God's providential rule of the world by the believers of their times (Dan. 4; Isaiah 40). This did not, however, mean that believers agreed with all that was done by these rulers or that believers were not first and foremost responsible to live according to God's will. Nevertheless, in all of these forms of government - whether pagan or theocratic - faithful believers held positions of governmental responsibility. They could faithfully govern within all these forms of government so long as what they were required to do did not conflict with their greater responsibilities to God himself (e.g. Daniel, etc.). If that occurred they were, as throughout the Bible, responsible "to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). That responsibility to God first is a clear biblical "given" from Genesis to Revelation which no faithful believer would ever have considered otherwise. Nevertheless, in most occurrences faithful believers could govern even within pagan systems of government and accomplish much good in the process. This, of course, is in complete accord with the godly precepts of God-ordained government as outlined in Romans 13. No faithful believer in biblical times, however, would ever have thought that the governance of man was capable of perfection. Rather they saw it as a temporary part of God's providential rule of the world which one day would find its fulfillment in God's just and final judgment of the world.

This has also been the dominant view of most Christians and Christian rulers in the Western world since the time of Christ. It is the view arising from the Bible itself as stated and assumed from Genesis to Revelation. Perhaps the best illustration of this view is the famous request for prayer by Benjamin

Franklin at the deliberations of the American Constitutional Convention of 1787 with which I will close. There is probably no time in human history when the various forms of human government available to mankind were more closely studied and scrutinized by such a sincere and earnest group of men. And yet, Franklin recognized the limitations of human understanding in such an endeavor, as he stated,

"Mr. President,

The small progress we have made after 4 or five weeks close attendance & continual reasonings with each other-our different sentiments on almost every question, several of the last producing as many noes as ayes, is methinks a melancholy proof of the imperfection of the Human Understanding. We indeed seem to feel our own want of political wisdom, since we have been running about in search of it. We have gone back to ancient history for models of Government, and examined the different forms of those Republics which having been formed with the seeds of their own dissolution now no longer exist. And we have viewed Modern States all round Europe, but find none of their Constitutions suitable to our circumstances.

In this situation of this Assembly, groping as it were in the dark to find political truth, and scarce able to distinguish it when presented to us, how has it happened, Sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of lights to illuminate our understandings?

In the beginning of the Contest with Great Britain, when we were sensible of danger, we had daily prayer in this room for the Divine protection. Our prayers, Sir, were heard, and they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a superintending providence in our favor.

To that kind providence we owe this happy opportunity of consulting in peace on the means of establishing our future national felicity. And have we now forgotten that powerful Friend? Or do we imagine we no longer need His assistance? I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth -- that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?

We have been assured, Sir, in the Sacred Writings, that 'except the Lord build the House, they labor in vain that build it.' I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without His concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel: We shall be divided by our partial local interests; our projects will be confounded, and we ourselves shall become a reproach and byword down to future ages ...

I therefore beg leave to move -- that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven, and its blessing on our deliberations, be held in this Assembly every morning before we proceed to business, and that one or more of the clergy of this city be requested to officiate in that service."

This request by Franklin was denied by the Constitutional Convention due to their fear of sectarian interference in their work - not, because they did not believe in God's providential rule. That denial, however, most definitely did not disallow "God's governance in the affairs of men" which has surely

continued from that point all the way until today irrespective of the actions of man. In sum, God governs in the affairs of men irrespective of the actions of man, and yet, God has also divinely ordained that man should govern justly over the earth on his behalf. We will consider this more deeply in our next blog.

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May 10, 2010

God and Government: " 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."

Biblically, all people are created in the image of God, are responsible for their thoughts, words, and deeds to God, and one day will give a final accounting of their lives to God at the final judgment. This responsibility of man to God and his ultimate accountability to God is a biblical given, or assumption, that runs through the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation. No biblical writer nor any faithful individual believer within the people of God - Old Testament or New Testament - would have ever considered anything different. Biblically, therefore, all ultimate judgment for human thoughts, words and deeds is God's. That judgment can be exercised in this life as attested by numerous biblical examples; however, God's final judgment and justice will be finally and ultimately fulfilled at the last judgment. Man's judgment of his fellowman is meant to be patterned on God's justice; however, it is only temporary and partial and awaits the full revelation of God's final judgment when God's perfect justice will be fully displayed.

Because ultimate judgment and justice belongs to God, both the Old and New Testaments command God's people to refrain from personal vengeance and to allow for God's vengeance to be exercised instead. The key OT scriptures appealed to or alluded to throughout the Bible are from Leviticus 19:18 and Deuteronomy 32:35 and are fundamental with respect to God's responsibility and the responsibility of the old covenant believer as set forth in the Mosaic Law:

First, the believer's basic responsibility:

"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself." (Lev. 19:18 NIV, TNIV).

Second, God's overriding and ultimate responsibility:

"It is mine to avenge: I will repay." (Deut. 32:35 NIV, TNIV)

The New Testament confirmation and continuation of this view is found throughout the pages of the New Testament and is perhaps illustrated most familiarly in Christ's Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). However, it is most clearly and specifically stated in Paul's Letter to the Romans 12:19 which confirms it as a bedrock way of thinking for the new covenant believer:

"Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written:

'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." (Rom. 12:19 NIV, TNIV).

In my lifetime of 55 years I would say that 95% of the Christians that I have met assume that this viewpoint of personal non-vengeance is that which the New Testament represents in contrast to the Old Testament. They believe that this viewpoint began with Jesus and his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and then continues throughout the New Testament as a new way of thinking and living in contrast to the vengeful attitude of the Old Testament in general and the old covenant Mosaic Law in particular. In a word, this way of understanding is simply wrong and has brought huge misunderstanding into the field of Christian ethics and morals.

The Old Testament in general and the Mosaic Law in particular mandates personal non-vengeance, personal non-retaliation, and personal love for one's enemies in a variety of ways (Ex. 20-23, Lev. 19). All of these principles are also understood to be included within the fundamental Mosaic Law's command for God's people to "love your neighbor as yourself." (Lev. 19:18). All of these principles are then confirmed over and over in the OT wisdom literature of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes (Job 31:29-32; Psalm 15; Prov. 20:22, 24:29, 25:21-22; Ecc. 12:13-14). Finally, these principles in a variety of ways are then made the focus of being the essence of true worship for God's people in the OT Prophetic literature (Hos. 6:6; Micah 6:6-8).

In the Sermon on the Mount and in his other teachings in the Gospels Jesus confirms rather than overturns these principles of the Old Testament Law (Matt. 5-7, 9:13, 12:7, 22:34-40, 23:23). Both in the Sermon on the Mount and throughout the Gospels Jesus is not teaching something that is ethically new but rather correcting misinterpretations and misapplications of the Old Testament Law. He begins the Sermon on the Mount by specifically stating that he did not come to abolish the Law and Prophets but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17-20). And, he ends his ethical teaching in the Sermon on the Mount by summing up all that he said with the principle of doing to others as you would have them do to you, which in turn, also "sums up the Law and the Prophets":

"So in everything, do to others as you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." (Matt. 7:12).

Paul, in turn, speaking after Christ's sacrificial death, resurrection and the giving of the gift of holy Spirit confirms the new covenant perspective in the same way. In fact, Paul - whose ways were in Christ - does not quote Jesus, but rather quotes directly from the Old Testament to confirm the continuing view of the believer as being one of love for one's neighbor as seen, among other things, by personal non-vengeance and love for one's enemies. Vengeance on the other hand, as in the Old Testament, is left to God.

And yet, at the very same time that both Old Testament and New Testament believers are commanded to practice personal non-vengeance God's own vengeance is commanded to be executed both in the Old Testament and the New Testament through the legitimately constituted governing authorities who derive their authority and power from God himself (Rom. 13:1-7). These governing authorities are

specifically called "ministers, or, servants of God." They also carry the specific designation of "avengers of God's wrath" who "do not carry the sword in vain" (Rom. 13:4-6). Believers are commanded to support them via taxes and with respect for their positions and there is no doubt that several NT believers actually occupied such positions of authority.

How can these things be? That will be the subject of my next blog post.

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April 18, 2010

God and Government: God's Final Punishment of the Unrighteous

Biblically, all human government derives its authority, legitimacy, and proper purposes from God almighty who is himself the sovereign ruler over all. This is stated and assumed from Genesis to Revelation and explicitly expounded in Romans 13 by the apostle Paul. Fundamental to this understanding is the truth that God is the creator and that man is a creature dependent upon and responsible to and accountable to God the creator. God actively rules and judges the world throughout the Bible and he has also delegated a subsidiary rulership and judgment of the world to man on his behalf.

Clearly, the Bible also teaches that all people will one day be judged by God at the time of the final judgment of the world and that the outcome of this righteous judgment will be final. For those who are counted as righteous the outcome will be eternal life - that is, life in the coming age of the kingdom of God. This will be life in a new immortal, imperishable, and glorious body that takes place in the imperishable realm of a new heavens and new earth of God's everlasting kingdom. This is the ultimate biblical hope and God's true intended destiny for mankind. For those who are judged as unrighteous the outcome will be eternal punishment - that is, a punishment pertaining to the final judgment and of the coming age. That final punishment will be a just judgment measured out according to the works of an individual and against the background of the motives of the heart. This punishment will ultimately end in a final destruction of the unrighteous and its effects will be final and, therefore, also everlasting.

Nowhere, however, does the Bible ever teach the concept of everlasting torment in hell. Instead, misunderstanding of these basic terms - eternal life and eternal punishment - has caused tremendous confusion over the centuries and continues to cloud the proper understanding of the biblical message. Would a good, loving and just God really condemn a person - no matter how wicked - to unending torment? How does that fit with the concept of justice that God expects from his creatures? One person who voiced his opposition to the concept of everlasting torment was Charles Darwin and he expresses what is an often cited view amongst intellectuals, agnostics and atheists:

"I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so, the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my father, brother and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine." (From Darwin's Autobiography, p. 87 as quoted in Janet Browne's recent biography Charles Darwin, Vol. II, p. 432).

Though one can acknowledge some truth in what Darwin says about the doctrine of everlasting punishment itself, the knowledge of what final punishment actually will be, biblically speaking, was available to him in the late 19th century just as it is to us today - that was especially true for someone of his wide contacts, acquaintances and eminent social position. His conclusion to reject Christianity is nothing less than a cop-out and an excuse to go his own self-seeking way. His problem with the doctrine should have been the launching point for an investigation of a matter that seemed inconsistent with the truth of the Bible as a whole - rather than, an excuse to reject Christianity itself. That's what it was for me and that's what it's been for countless others in history up until today who have chosen to be honest in their search for truth. Let's be clear: the God of the Bible and the Christ of the New Testament are the supreme examples of love, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness in all of history. They are also the supreme examples of bringing true righteousness and justice to the world. The sending of God's Son to die for the sins of the world is the greatest manifestation of God's own righteousness and of his love for mankind. Corresponding to this, the final judgment of the world will be the only event that will bring true and lasting justice, deliverance, and righteousness to the world. The wrongs of this present evil age will finally be righted, the injustices of an unjust world will finally be redressed, and the righteous will shine forth in the kingdom of their father. What godly, caring, compassionate, and righteous person would not want this to occur?

In sum, the final judgment of the world is certainly something to be feared and dreaded by the ungodly and to be taken with the greatest seriousness by all. However, it will be a just judgment that is according to works and the motives of the heart of the individual. Most importantly, the punishment of the ungodly will correspond precisely to the justice of God. It will not be everlasting torment but rather a punishment - however severe - that ultimately results in the final destruction of the ungodly.

We have several articles relating to this topic in our articles section of this web-site and I encourage you to read through them. However, for the purpose of showing the consistent biblical understanding of this subject - in contrast to the post-biblical understanding that developed over the centuries - I present the following excellent articles that were sent to me by Patrick Navas:

The Final End of the Wicked

Everlasting Torment Examined

Revelation 20:10

May our understanding of this immensely important subject be formed by the consistent biblical witness of both the Old and New Testaments rather than by the misunderstandings of post-biblical philosophies, traditions, art, and literature.

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April 4, 2010

Resurrection Sunday

My last post in my series on God and Government dealt with the biblical reality of a final judgment that will be coming upon the world in the future. In this Easter weekend it is perhaps useful to pause and consider the reality of what Christ's own resurrection means for us today. Let us ask: Will there really be a future resurrection of the just and unjust when every person will give account of himself before God? That is a vital question that every honest and sincere person should ask. It is amazing how many people who profess to be Christians have themselves had a hard time committing to this truth. However, biblically it is only a matter of believing in one crucial event which happened in history and that, thus, leads to another. The Old Testament foretold a resurrection of the dead and the New Testament clearly and boldly testifies that Christ, who died for our sins, was then raised by God from the dead never to die again. He is, therefore, the firstborn from the dead. If we choose to believe that then it follows, logically and biblically, that God will raise us from the dead in the future as well. Therefore, the key to believing in a future resurrection of the dead is to remember that you do in fact believe in the already accomplished resurrection of Christ some two thousand years ago. If God raised Christ from the dead he can, and will, raise us from the dead as well. The apostle Paul himself emphasizes these very truths:

12"But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. 14And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. 15More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. 16For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. 17And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. 18Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. 19If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."

20"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. 22For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. 23But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. 24Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power."

50"I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— 52in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53For the perishable must clothe itself with

the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. 54When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true:

"Death has been swallowed up in victory."

55"Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?"[h]

56"The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

58Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

(I Cor. 15: 12-24, 50-58).

May these words of Paul to the church at Corinth be his words to us as well!

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March 29, 2010

God and Government: The Righteous Judgment of a Righteous God, Part II

Sam Harris who is considered to be one of the four horsemen of the "new atheism" was recently interviewed for a CNN article entitled "Philosopher: Why We Should Ditch Religion." Harris, portrayed by CNN as a scientist/philosopher, is often grouped together with three fellow atheists including the British scientist Richard Dawkins, the U.S. philosopher Daniel Dennet, and the Anglo-American journalist Christopher Hitchens. I can't imagine why anyone who has read any of their writings would want to read much more - except to help others to see their many errors - nor can I imagine much of anyone that I would less like for the youth of our times to hold as role-models. It is only in the modern times in which we now live that such morally bankrupt people could be held up as intelligent paragons of wisdom. Many books and articles have been written by others to show the many historical, theological, scientific, and philosophical errors of these writers. However, for the purpose of comparison of the biblical world-view here is what Harris had to say:

"For the world to tackle truly important problems, people have to stop looking to religion to guide their moral compasses," the philosopher Sam Harris told CNN.

"We should be talking about real problems, like nuclear proliferation and genocide and poverty and the crisis in education..."

"These are issues which tremendous swings in human well-being depend on. And it's not at the center of our moral concern."

"Religion causes people to fixate on issues of less moral importance," said Harris, a well-known secularist, philosopher and neuroscientist who is the author of the books "The End of Faith" and "Letter to a Christian Nation."

"Religion has convinced us that there's something else entirely other than concerns about suffering. There's concerns about what God wants, there's concerns about what's going to happen in the afterlife," he said.

"And, therefore, we talk about things like gay marriage as if it's the greatest problem of the 21st century. We even have a liberal president who ostensibly is against gay marriage because his faith tells him it's an abomination."

"It's completely insane."

Well, "sanity" is of course very much in the eye of the beholder. In contrast to what Harris says the Bible holds up each person's individual responsibility before God as primary. The most important issues of life are not the "big" issues that he describes but rather the issues of daily life of each individual person before God. The Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes sums up the Old Testament view as such:

"Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter:

Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 NIV).

This of course is the biblical view throughout beginning with the creation of mankind in Genesis 1:26-28 and continuing onwards. However, when one flips upside down the biblical relationship of God as creator and man as a dependent, responsible, and accountable creature we end up precisely where the non-recognition of God and his standards leads as clearly set forth in Romans 1:18-32 - that is, to a "depraved [debased (ESV), reprobate (KJV)] mind to do what should not be done" (Rom. 1:28-32 NIV). By refusing to recognize the God of the Bible Harris, in effect, becomes his own god and his own arbiter of right and wrong for himself - and, please notice, the arbiter of right and wrong for others as well. But, in contrast to what Harris says, it is precisely his frame of mind that leads to the practice of personal and corporate sin that brings about divine judgment throughout the Bible both in the Old Testament examples - provided in the last post - as well as in the New Testament, including in the Final Judgment.

In fact, following on the many examples of God's righteous judgment portrayed in history throughout the Old Testament the New Testament shifts its focus to the Final Judgment. The Old Testament examples of God's judgment become examples for New Testament believers of God's righteous judgment that will take place in the Final Judgment at the end of the age. The last books of the Old Testament provide the clearest example of this shift in focus of thinking when it speaks of a future resurrection that results in some of the dead awakening to life of the age to come and others awakening to the shame and contempt of the age to come (Dan. 12:2). This forms the background of what Jesus and Paul both constantly refer to: a future and final resurrection of both the just and of the unjust (John 5:24; Acts 24:15) with their corresponding outcomes of life of the age to come ("eternal life") and punishment or destruction of the age to come ("eternal punishment" or "eternal destruction"). This final judgment thus began a demarcation in Jewish and, then, Christian thinking of a present evil age in which we now live that would be brought to an end by a final judgment and then replaced by a coming future age in which God's righteous kingdom would rule in a renewed heavens and earth. The day, or time, in which God's final righteous judgment would take place became known, among others terms, as "the day of the Lord" or "the day of God's wrath." The agent through whom God would bring about both this final judgment of the unjust and the liberating salvation of the just would be the Messiah or Christ - God's anointed Savior and King. It is around this Old Testament expectation, hope and fulfillment that the entire New Testament revolves.

Right at the beginning of New Testament the righteous judgment of a righteous God shifts dramatically to be focused on the final judgment and its resulting condemnation of the unjust and salvation of the just. With the coming of John the Baptist, Jesus the Messiah, and then of Paul the apostle the entire biblical perspective changes. God's righteous judgment as portrayed in the expression "the wrath of God" is still at work in the world (Rom. 1:18ff) however, everything is now primarily seen to be moving towards, and culminating in, that which occurs "on the day of God's wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (Matt. 3:7-10; Matt. 4:17; Rom. 2:5). The apostle Paul sets forth the biblical scope of God's righteous judgment in the New Testament's clearest passage on the subject in Romans chapter 2:1-11:

2:1 "Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. 2 We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. 3 Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? 4 Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? 5 But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

6 He will render to each one according to his works: 7 to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; 8 but for those who are self-seeking [1] and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. 9 There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, 10 but glory and

honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. 11 For God shows no partiality." (ESV).

Paul's conclusion from all of this is that on the basis of works no one will be justified in God's sight. Fortunately, God has provided another way through the sacrifice of God's own Son for the sins of the world. Thus, God's own righteousness provides a justification and salvation solely on the basis of grace through faith in Christ (Romans 3:19-26).

The Gospel of John vividly presents the same truths:

16 "For God so loved the world, [9] that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. 21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God." (John 3:16-19 ESV).

All that Jesus, as the Messiah of God, says and does in the Gospels must be understood in this light. He is not a modern humanitarian philanthropist, nor a civic minded secular humanist, nor a nature loving green activist, nor a marching anti-war pacifist, nor a cynical yet hip college professor, nor even a British socialist archbishop - all of which many 19th, 20th and 21st century "scholars" would have us believe. Instead, as the Messiah of God he is uniquely concerned with the welfare of God's own people and then bringing others into that community of God's people. He is God's unique Son who makes known his father God by his divine words and works and who calls people to repentance and salvation in the light of God's coming judgment and salvation. In fact, it is our own attitude towards Jesus, the Messiah of God - faith in him or rejection of him - that is itself the determining factor of our own individual condemnation or justification with respect to the final judgment. We can go even further than that and say with Jesus and Paul that the one who believes in Jesus as the Messiah of God will not come into condemnation at the final judgment but has already "passed from death to life" (John 5:24; Eph. 2:1-8). This is the free gift of salvation received through faith in Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. It is salvation from God's wrath to come at the final judgment and unto life of the age to come in the glorious kingdom of God. This is the "good news" of the gospel message and it is also the central truth of the entire New Testament itself (cf. John 3:16-36; John 20:30-31; I John 5:11-12).

But why is this message of "salvation" such good news? Because from the biblical perspective God's final judgment is indeed coming when every person will give account of himself before God. People can ignore it, hide from it, or even laugh at it as though it is a relic of the beliefs of a by-gone age. However,

from the biblical perspective it is indeed coming and every single person will one day be subject to it. In the meantime God's providential rule and judgment over the world continues and the responsibility of human rulers to rule justly on God's behalf also continues (Romans 13). However, at God's final judgment of the world the true justice that all of God's faithful long for will at long last take place. In this truth God's people can be at peace in the midst of a world marred by sin and injustice - for, God's kingdom will finally come and God's will will be finally done "on earth as it is in heaven."

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March 22, 2010

God and Government: The Righteous Judgment of a Righteous God, Part I

The Bible right from the very beginning in the Book of Genesis presents God as the all-wise creator, sovereign ruler, and righteous judge of the heavens and earth. As the crowning achievement of God's creation man is created by God in his image to rule over the earth in a godly manner. As such man is responsible and accountable to God for his actions. This point of view continues throughout the entire Bible and there is never any deviation from it. Every single biblical writer wrote within this framework and none of them would have ever even considered anything differently. To read and understand the Bible correctly one must read it from this point of view. Unfortunately, many people tend to read into the Bible their own modern values of human rights and then judge God and man from their human point of view. They thus turn the biblical view of God as creator and man as creature on its head and thereby end up creating a skewed view of both God and man. But let us insist on this fundamental biblical view: irrespective of the rights, freedoms, and standards of justice guaranteed by human governments, God's righteous standards for conduct, accountability, and judgment remain the same. Following on this, each individual person is responsible and accountable to God himself and will one day be judged by him. All proper judgment of man by his fellowman is a subset of God's own judgment of man and is to take place in the light of the truth that man is a creature of God, the creator, and that man is created in the image of God to rule over the earth on God's behalf (Gen. 1:26ff; Psalm 8).

This truth is consistent throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation and is fundamental to understanding the biblical point of view. God does not create and then withdraw from the world to let it run on its own like a great clock. Instead, he is actively and personally involved in providentially governing the world and he himself judges repeatedly throughout the Bible. At the same time he expects man to rule over the earth and to judge righteously on his behalf. God's own judgment often proceeds from the fact that man has failed to live, rule and judge righteously himself and thus needs God's own divine righteousness expressed in his judgment on sinners and gracious salvation for his people in the light of his over-arching divine plan. There are many examples of God's own divine judgment throughout the Bible. Let us list a few of the major ones in the Old Testament:

1. God's Judgment upon Man and Woman in the Garden of Eden.
2. God's Judgment upon the human race in the Genesis Flood.
4. God's Judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah.
5. God's Judgment of the Egyptians.
6. God's Judgment of the Canaanites.
7. God's Judgment of Israel in their captivity to Assyria and Babylon.

Look at the context of each of these cases and it is crystal clear the reasons why God exercises his righteous judgment. In every case it is not forgotten that God is the creator and man is the creature. God's judgment is not random but always in response to idolatry, sin and corruption - usually on a massive scale. In other words, these accounts portray the righteous judgment of a righteous God upon his own creatures and creation in the light of his own created order and his own divine plan. The biblical writers never forget this point of view. It is always front and center in their minds and one of the major points is setting forth these accounts.

From the very beginning of Genesis it is assumed that man, created in God's image, knows intuitively from his own being and existence that there is indeed a sovereign creator God whom he should worship, trust and obey - a truth confirmed in God's creation itself (cf. Rom. 1:18-20). Following on this, it is also assumed throughout that man, created in God's image, knows instinctively from his own nature right from wrong and is thus responsible and accountable to God as his creator for doing what is right (cf. Rom. 2:14-15). Nevertheless, man consistently chooses to ignore God and to practice evil. He thus brings upon himself the consequent judgment of a righteous God. Of course, judged by modern day standards of human rights and human freedoms these judgments could be taken to portray God as an intolerant judge who does not respect the diversity of human rights, customs, traditions or freedoms in the world. However, judged by biblical standards this judgment is seen to be the righteous judgment of a righteous God upon a sinful humanity in which - as in the Genesis flood - "every inclination of the human heart was only evil all the time" and thus manifested itself in a sinful human society that was "corrupt in God's sight and full of violence" (Gen. 6:1-13).

Let us remember that God's plan in creation was not simply to create man and then let him do as he pleased - as though man has some special intrinsic importance or sanctity in and of himself apart from his proper relationship to God his creator. Instead, the intrinsic value of man retains its intrinsic value only if man retains his proper relationship to God his creator. Thus man's own standard for his conduct toward his fellowman is seen in terms of his being created in God's image and the responsibilities he has to rule over the earth in this regard. God's own judgment of man is based on this truth. Following on this, man's judgment of his fellow-man is also based on this truth as set forth clearly in Genesis 9:

"And from each human being too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being.

'Whoever sheds human blood,

by human beings shall their blood be shed;

for in the image of God

has God made humankind" (Gen. 9:5-6 TNIV).

This standard of judgment for capital punishment stands on its head much of modern thinking concerning human sanctity of life and human rights. Nevertheless, this righteous and godly standard continues throughout the Bible and no biblical writer would have ever considered this standard to be anything other than a just and righteous standard (cf. Paul in Rom. 13:1-7; Acts 25:11). That is because biblically though man's intrinsic worth is equal to all other men, his worth as a living individual person is dependent upon living according to his proper relationship to God as one who is created in God's image. When human beings no longer recognize that relationship correctly their value system changes in a corresponding way so that as the Greeks and the Renaissance thinkers commonly said, "man is the measure of all things." This is an inversion of God's created order and, biblically, nothing could be farther from the truth. God and his righteous standards are the true measure of all things and it is by those righteous standards that God judges and that God's rulers are also to judge on his behalf.

Of course, there is more to these biblical examples of judgment than just judgment itself. In each case God not only judges man but also saves, cleanses, preserves and prepares in the light of his own ultimate plans and purposes for the good of mankind. God's judgment is always mixed with his mercy and grace. This, in fact, is a consistent theme throughout the Bible. God's righteous judgment is always in relation to the ultimate outworking of his plan for the good of his people and creation. In Genesis 1-11 faithful Noah along with his faithful progeny is a prime example of this out-working of God's plan. However, the entire section of Genesis 1-11 also works together to prepare and point the way to an even greater figure in God's plan whom we first meet at the end of Genesis 11. That figure is faithful Abraham, the one in whom and through whom, God will bring his blessing to the entire world (Gen. 12:1-3). But, in order to bring about this blessing to the world God continues to exercise his righteous judgment and expects man to judge righteously on his behalf. That perspective never changes in the Bible.

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March 8, 2010

God and Government: The Biblical Worldview

Throughout the Bible there are certain biblical givens, or assumptions, that are common to all of the biblical writers. Though these are stated or illustrated in various ways throughout the Bible, they are often simply assumed without any need for explanation. Instead, these assumptions formed the foundation for the biblical writers' worldview - that is, their basis for understanding of all matters

including that of God and government. These biblical assumptions in relation to God and government include the following:

1. God is the all-wise creator, loving sustainer, and righteous ruler of the heavens and earth. As such, all things are under his sovereign and providential rule and he is always at work - far beyond human understanding - in guiding history to the fulfillment of his own divine purposes both for mankind and for God's entire creation. Ultimately, God's justice will prevail and God's purposes will be fulfilled.

2. God has created mankind in his own image to rule over the earth on his behalf. As such, man is responsible to live according to God's righteous standards in his relationship to both God and his fellowman who is also made in God's image. The biblical standard for justice is therefore summarized in the two great commandments of loving God and loving one's neighbor as oneself. Man is responsible and accountable to God for how he conducts his life in this light and man is also subject to God's judgment both now and in the future for that conduct.

3. All governing rulers - whether believers, pagans, or unbelievers - ultimately derive their power to rule from God and are ultimately responsible to God for governing justly. Their rule is for a limited time within God's overarching plan and their execution of justice is limited by the reality of the institutions, situations, and conditions in which they live. All - without exception - are accountable to God for how they govern and all are subject to God's righteous judgment both now and in the future.

It is vital to grasp the fact that this is the biblical worldview all the way through the Bible. It begins in Genesis and goes through the Book of Revelation. Though mankind lives under many systems of government during the course of history, God's standard - that is, what he truly desires from man - does not change in regards to justice. It is based on the truth that man is created in the image of God. Due to the entrance of sin the Bible looks at the world in the most realistic way yet never loses sight of its foundations. Throughout the Bible allowance is made for sin, man's hardness of heart, and the historical conditions in which man lives. Nevertheless, God's righteous and just standard always comes back to the truth that God has created man in his image to rule over the earth. Therefore men should reflect God's image in the righteous conduct of their lives. Though all men have fallen short of this standard, this purpose of God has been set-forth, or demonstrated, in the life of Jesus Christ, God's unique Son, who is himself the image of the invisible God. Christ's example thus becomes the standard, ideal and goal for all mankind. Ultimately, man's true destiny will only be fulfilled when he himself is transformed into the image of God's Son. This is a process that begins for a Christian in this life but will only be fully completed at Christ's future return. Until that time governing authorities are necessary - within the overarching plan of God - for the promotion of the common good and for the suppression, deterrence, and punishment of evil.

Much of what I've said above is a repetition of what I've already set out in my article [Biblical Justice in the Light of the Biblical World View](#). Nevertheless, I thought it important to set out these fundamental assumptions that are shared by all the biblical writers. See my article for further explanation along with two other articles on God's sovereign rule:

[The Reign of God](#)

The Sovereignty of God

Biblical Justice in the Light of the Biblical Worldview

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March 1, 2010

God and Government: Introduction

During the past fourteen months our weekly Adult Bible Study Fellowship within Cary Christian Fellowship has been doing an intensive study of the subject of "God and Government." We began our study in the Book of Genesis and have gone all the way through the Bible studying everything that we could find pertaining to every aspect of this subject. For me personally the subject of God and government has also been the focus of a life-long study both from the perspective of the Bible and from the study of the related fields of history and government. This personal study began with a growing interest in the subject during my childhood up through high school. It continued through my college academic studies in history, government and international relations. Then it was put into practice by many years of living, studying, working and traveling in many different countries with often radically different governmental systems. It has also included over three and a half decades of teaching the Bible in a variety Bible study fellowships and house churches. And, finally, it has culminated in over a decade of teaching all areas of AP history and government at Woods Charter School, a college and university preparatory high school in Chapel Hill, North Carolina where I have had some of the best students and colleagues imaginable. Through all of these experiences - from childhood onwards - I have been a devout Christian who was concerned to live according to God's will. Because of this I have always endeavored to form my understanding of the subject of God and government against the background of what I believe to be a biblical world-view based on a proper understanding of the Bible as a whole.

This topic is, of course, often contentious amongst professing Christian believers. Nevertheless, it is too important a subject to ignore. So let me say, whatever others may think of me or my presentation of this subject it is my assumption that those who read this are normally going to be Christian believers themselves who, like me, are endeavoring to live principled Christ-like lives for God. It is unreasonable to expect that we will agree on every detail and some of us may simply disagree in principle on the topic as a whole. However, it is my fundamental belief that a person is a Christian - justified and saved - solely by God's unmerited grace through faith in Jesus Christ. I believe that this salvation is a gift from God and not a result of works on our part. Thus, a person can be a justified Christian believer while at the very same time holding to a wrong understanding of particular topics pertaining to the Christian life. I think it is obvious that we are all to some degree at least in that category. In fact, we are all at some particular point on the growth continuum that moves upwards towards full Christian maturity - a maturity not to be fully attained until Christ's return. Sincere disagreement on our understanding of particular biblical

topics should not, however, call into question the Christian commitment of another professing believer. Due allowance should be made for each of us to grow in our understanding of biblical topics. Were there not a certain amount of at least apparent ambiguity in the details on this and certain other topics there would be no disagreement at all among believers. Thus, to frame this topic in the context of true Christian commitment or personal obedience or disobedience rather than differences in understanding is to poison the waters from the outset and can be an impetus to compel someone to go against his conscience. To do this is to go against the clear biblical teaching that God looks on the heart and will judge all people not only by their actions but also by their motives and intentions. Let us then frame this study with a sincere search to understand and apply God's word to our lives in the best way we are able despite our limitations as both fallible human beings and maturing Christian believers.

By way of introduction let me now set forth two fundamental guiding principles in this study along with some explanation of each:

1. As with all biblical topics we must first consider this topic from the point of view of the original intent and meaning of the Bible as a whole rather than from isolated sections.

The Bible presents a story of God's plans and purposes for mankind and the world; then the on-going accomplishment of those plans and purposes in both creation and the subsequent history of the world; and finally, it presents the ultimate fulfillment of those plans and purposes through the redemptive work of his unique Son culminating in the final new heavens and earth of the kingdom of God. This is one continuous story with many parts that is presented in many different historical eras, through many different literary genres, and over a period of thousands of years. To properly understand God's will for the present day the Christian believer must properly understand the biblical plan and history that preceded us and upon which we now stand. This is also true of our understanding of the subject of God and government which forms a part of that overall understanding of the Bible as a whole.

As we shall see, there is both continuity and change in the biblical presentation of this topic. First, there is a general continuity in the biblical picture of God's purpose for government from Genesis to Revelation in the Bible. That purpose can be summed up by the term - justice. That is, justice as defined by God the creator in relationship to mankind - his creatures - whom he has created in his image to rule over the earth. However, there are also certain changes that take place in terms of believers' relationship to government as we move through the Bible. For example, there is a change from the tribal governmental situation of the Patriarchal era in the Book of Genesis to that of Israel as a theocracy under the old covenant of the Mosaic Law beginning in Exodus. Later, however, the Israelitic theocracy is split, then taken into captivity and finally restored to its homeland. In all of these situations Israel is forced to live under and deal with ancient pagan governments of various kinds while at times still retaining some limited form of local and religious self-rule. When we come to the NT Christianity emerges out of Judaism with a fair degree of autonomy in its local house-churches but under the civil governmental rule of the Roman empire.

In all of these situations God's just desire for the role of government remains the same (eg. Psalm 82). It is a justice based on dealing with mankind according to the foundational truth that God has created all

mankind in his image to rule over the earth. All people therefore are to revere God as the creator and to treat each other with the dignity and respect inherent in each being made equally in God's image. Government should be based on those two principles. However, as the history of mankind unfolds from the Book of Genesis onwards this basis for government is often not historically possible. The hope therefore emerges for the righteous rule of God to one day prevail and be established in a future Kingdom of God in a renewed earth. In the meantime, due to sin, the hardness of man's heart, and the many varied situations of history the believer must adapt himself to a variety of different governmental systems that stretch from Genesis to Revelation in the Bible. In all of these cases - both in the OT and the NT - the study of this topic of God and government necessitates understanding each scriptural section related to this topic in the light of its own original intention and meaning within its own particular historical context as well as in the light of the Bible as a whole. That is what we will earnestly endeavor to do.

2. Once we have considered the scope of the entire biblical view about God and government our fundamental and culminating Christian perspective must then be shaped by the new covenant perspective of the Christian believer.

The new covenant era of salvation began on the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2:1ff. and all of the NT Letters are written in the light of that new reality. The new covenant was foretold in the OT and is based on the sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ and then the giving of God's gift of holy Spirit to all - both Jew and Gentile - who have faith in Christ as the crucified and risen Son of God. The new covenant is not a covenant of the letter, but of a "life-giving Spirit" (II Cor. 3:6, Rom. 8:1-2) and those who live within it are to live Christ-like lives "in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code" (Rom. 7:6). It must be emphasized that the new covenant era of salvation did not begin in the period of time recorded in the Gospels. Otherwise what did Christ die for?! Instead, the Gospels set the stage for the coming of the new covenant era as recorded in the Book of Acts and the NT Letters. Therefore, once we have considered the entire biblical view about God and government our fundamental and culminating Christian perspective must then be shaped by the new covenant perspective of the Christian believer who - through faith in Christ and the corresponding reception of the Spirit - is now both a new creation "in Christ" (Eph. 2:8-10, II Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:14-16) and, as such, someone whose manner of life, as with the apostle Paul, is to be conformed to the mind of Christ - but, only "in the new way of the Spirit, not in the old way of written code" (Rom. 7:6; I Cor. 2:6-16, 4:14-17, 11: 1; 2 Cor. 10:5; Phil. 2:5ff; etc.).

Thus, the Christian perspective must be built on God's original intent for mankind found in the OT as being created in the image of God. Then on the example of the life and teachings of Christ - who is himself the image of the invisible God - in the Gospels. However, the primary and governing focus must be that of the new covenant perspective in Christ as set forth in the in the NT Book of Acts and the NT Letters. It is the Book of Acts that sets forth the out-pouring of the gift of holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost that began the new covenant era of salvation and it is both the Book of Acts and the NT Letters that explain the proper understanding and application Christ's life, death and resurrection in the new covenant era of salvation that has followed. It is in the Book of Acts and the NT Letters that we see the Spirit leading the new covenant believers into "all truth" - that is, into a greater understanding of the

new covenant itself and into new and varied applications of the truths of the new covenant, just as Christ himself had foretold.

Therefore, in terms of the subject of "God and government" it is not, for example, the old covenant Mosaic Law nor Christ's Sermon on the Mount that are the governing words on the subject; rather, it is the whole-Bible view seen now from the perspective of a new covenant believer in Christ. The fullest exposition of the whole-Bible view as it pertains to the Christian believer in the new covenant era is Paul's presentation in his Letter to the Romans in chapter 13. That perspective is built on and in continuity with the perspective of the entire Bible including that of the Old Testament and of Christ himself. As Christians today, our own applications of the biblical teaching about God and government - under whatever type of government we ourselves may live - must therefore first and foremost be governed by a correct understanding of Romans 13 and the companion new covenant teachings such as I Peter 2:13-17, I Timothy 2:1-8, Titus 3:1-2, etc. Of course, as is true throughout the Bible, these verses must always be understood along with the ever-present and consistent biblical qualifier of "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Whenever any government demands that we obey it before, or rather than, God our duty to God comes first.

The new covenant perspective presents the believer in Christ as one who is even now a citizen of the coming kingdom of God by virtue of having received the gift of God's Spirit. This gift of the Spirit is the down-payment, or first-fruits, of the believer's future inheritance in the coming kingdom of God. Perhaps the greatest example for how to live as a Christian today as a citizen of God's kingdom while also living under earthly governmental systems of this world is the apostle Paul. Paul, of course, patterned his own life after Christ and exhorted other Christians to do the same. Neither Christ nor Paul would have ever even contemplated, much less sanctioned, any attempt to set up God's kingdom on earth by force of arms or by waging war as in some sort of religious crusade (John 18:33-36; II Cor. 10:1-5; Eph. 6:10-18). On the other hand, both Jesus and Paul would, and did, expect that governmental authorities were responsible to God to execute justice on earth in a manner consistent with the authority given those rulers by God himself (eg. Rom. 13, etc.). In this they were entirely at one with the Old Testament perspective (eg. Psalm 82, etc.). Both also believed that proper governmental rule was normally a benefit to the accomplishment of God's purposes (eg. I Tim. 2:1-8), though they also recognized, in unity with the OT, that God could even turn unjust governmental rule to the accomplishment of his own purposes - the crucifixion of Christ being, of course, the supreme example of this.

Paul, however, lived in a very different situation than Christ. He thus applied the principles - not the literal "letter" - which Christ had taught and lived his own life under the changed conditions of the new covenant era brought about by Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection by which he mediated and instituted, via the Spirit, a new covenant between God and man. Paul also lived in different political, geographical and historical situations than Christ. While Christ was on earth he lived as a Jew under the local religious rule of Judaism but also under the over-arching civil rule of the Romans. During his life he came face to face and dealt with the legal systems and power of both Judaism and Rome. However, he had few legal rights in comparison with Paul and his mission was quite, even radically, different since ultimately he was sent to die for the sins of the whole world. His ministry on earth was primarily to the

lost sheep of the house of Israel, though even then his whole life and teaching pointed forward to his future sacrificial death, resurrection, giving of the Spirit, and the new covenant to come. He thus ministered faithfully to Israel until it was time for him to give his life as a ransom for the sins of the world as the mediator of the new covenant; thus, opening up a new era in God's plan of salvation for all mankind. Not via a covenant of the letter, but a covenant of the Spirit; for, as the Apostle Paul was to later state, "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (II Cor. 3:6).

The new covenant, then, changes the biblical perspective and the Christian believer must see everything through this changed perspective. As such, Paul "whose ways were in Christ" becomes one of the supreme examples of how to live as a Christian believer with respect to the subject of God and government. Paul not only penned (or dictated) Romans 13 but also - as a "dual citizen" of heaven and Rome - he lived as a citizen of God's kingdom while also zealously claiming his own legal rights as a Roman citizen. Paul's mission was not die for the sins of the world but to bring the liberating life-giving message of the new covenant to the world by being a "living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God" (Rom. 12:1-2ff). Thus, Paul's words in Romans 13 must be understood in the light of his new covenant perspective and his own personal example in the Book of Acts and in his NT Letters of his own actions with respect to both local governments and the over-arching Roman government. Thus, in contrast - but not in contradiction - to Jesus Paul did not "turn the other cheek" to Jewish injustice; instead, he demanded of justice both of the Jewish officials and of himself in accordance with principles of Jewish law (Acts 23:1-5; cf. John 18:19-23). Nor did he "go the extra mile" in the face of either Jewish or Roman injustice. Instead, at times he demanded his full rights as a Roman citizen and even relied on the use of force - both actual and implicit - by Roman soldiers, as necessary, in order to protect both his life and his legal rights as a Roman citizen (Acts 23:10 - 35). Paul's teaching and example are both simply loaded with principles which we as citizens can study and apply to our lives today. Logically, we ourselves should follow his example by asking how those new covenant principles relating to God and government apply to us in our own situations today. This is ultimately the main point of our quest for understanding in this study. Like Paul then, let us do this "in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (Rom. 7:6).

I will end today's blog by presenting three articles which deal with this topic from the perspective set out above. These will give a pretty good feel for the topic as a whole. The first article is an excellent, straight-forward exposition of Christian Citizenship in the light of Romans 13 by my good friend Chuck LaMattina. The second article is by me on the topic of Biblical Justice in the light of the Biblical World-view. The third is by J. Daryl Charles on the subject of Just War and is entitled "Between Pacifism and Jihad." This Just War aspect of the topic is often the main point of conflict amongst Christians on this subject of God and government and so it's good to get it out on the table immediately so that we can think about it as we move along. Charles' article presents biblical justice - and by extension, Just War - as a sort of golden mean between the extremes of pacifism and crusade (or Jihad). Since publishing this article not long after the events of 9/11 Charles has written a similarly titled book on the same subject.

Now, the articles:

Christian Citizenship

Biblical Justice

Between Pacifism and Jihad

I will try to blog every week (or two) and then publish them on Mondays. I welcome your comments and will try to interact with them as best I can.

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Feb. 18, 2010

New Year Web-site Up-date

The new year has been with us now for about a month and a half and I've been working during this time on updating the web-site. Now I'm ready to starting to blogging again on a more consistent basis - hopefully, weekly. Over the years we've had quite a few compliments about the web-site and it seems to have been useful and a blessing for many. We appreciate those compliments and we also appreciate suggestions for making the web-site even more useful. It has never been our purpose, of course, to pretend that we have a corner on the truth. Instead, we try to present our own biblical studies along with additional web-sites, articles, etc. by others that we believe offer solid presentations of biblical topics, even if we do not agree entirely on every biblical issue. This has always been the purpose of The Unity of the Spirit both in its newsletter form and now in its web-site form as well. In short, our goal has always been to make available as much solid information as we can about the Bible and about living the Christian life within the context of endeavoring to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

Let me review briefly the current format of the Unity of the Spirit web-site and explain our offerings and up-dates. At the top of the page we have our headings for our own recommendations, articles, book-reviews, and the archives of every past issue of our newsletter The Unity of the Spirit. I've made a few up-dates to the recommendations section and Scot Hahn has done an extensive revision and updating of our book reviews. One thing I would call everyone's attention to is that the NIV will be updated in a new edition coming out in 2011 that will attempt to incorporate the best features of the current NIV and the TNIV. At that time both the current NIV edition and the TNIV will no longer be published. Hopefully, this new 2011 edition will achieve the goals of the translators and will prove to be an excellent version of the Bible for all-around use. It will probably be a good first translation for many people and at least a second or third version for comparative purposes for others. Of course, given the uncertainties of Bible translations you might want to also be sure to have a good current NIV and TNIV to hang on to as well.

Moving on, in the right hand column we continue to present an on-line version of my book God's Plan of Salvation as well as my on-line introductory class on understanding the Bible entitled "God's Living Word". I wrote the first edition of the book over 16 years ago and this on-line version represents a slight variation of the second edition published in 2001. A book version is available for free. Just e-mail me if

you'd like one. If you listen to the on-line class "God's Living Word" be sure to also use the syllabus which was prepared primarily by Scot Hahn. In fact, if you have a choice of listening to the class or reading/studying the syllabus, do the latter!

Below these offerings we continue to list web-sites where you can read many of the major Bible versions on-line. Bible Gateway is particularly good for comparative study and most of the sights have excellent additional information, articles, blogs, etc. about their own versions as well.

Just beneath these Bible version web-sites we've listed various interesting and informative web-sites relating to Bible study or Bible related topics. Different people will find different sights interesting for them and many will probably want to skip them all-together. Many of these, however, are loaded with good articles on biblical topics and related matters. I hope many of you will take some time to check them out thoroughly and see what they have to offer. Though not always agreeing with everything said on these web-sites, we believe that all of them have excellent and interesting information, articles, blogs, etc. A few comments on these web-sites:

Better Bibles Blog: this site is run by Wayne Leman a Bible translator and linguist and has lots of interesting information and blog discussions aimed at making better Bible translations. There are a lot interesting contributors to the discussions and there are a fairly wide range of theological backgrounds and viewpoints, though theology per se is not allowed into the discussions except as to how it relates to translation.

Koinonia: this is a site for many Bible scholars who are associated with Zondervan Publishing Co. There are some very interesting blogs and a wide variety of topics discussed about biblical matters. It is theologically conservative on the whole.

The Centre for Public Christianity: this is a very interesting, biblically sound, and informative web-site dealing with all manner of topics related to Christianity. It is centered in Australia and its written and video/pod-cast, etc. presentations are of the highest quality.

Evangelica: This is certainly one of my favorite blogs. The sight is run by Michael Bird (Australian) and Joel Willitts (American) who are both young (by my standards) biblical scholars and academics. They try to keep the rest of us abreast of what is happening in the biblical/theological world and their blog-posts run from the simply informative to highly entertaining to both theologically interesting and perceptive. Being one generation older than these guys and being familiar with both the biblical scholars, etc. of my generation and older it is interesting for me to compare the perspective of an up and coming generation of Bible scholars, teachers, and academics.

C.S. Lewis Society: This name speaks for itself. Though the biblical accuracy of C.S. Lewis sometimes leaves something to be desired, he nevertheless was full of biblical, theological, historical and literary wisdom. All of which was framed by his adult-life conversion to Christianity and his serious study of the Bible and its applications throughout the rest of his life. One can agree with his general train of thought and his immense wisdom without feeling the need to agree all of the details of his biblical exposition.

This web-site offers much and also has a keen focus on issues of intelligent design and the surrounding debate.

Touchstone: this website is loaded with many interesting articles combining biblical, theological, historical and current events issues. There are very many contributors do it from a variety of Protestant, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox persuasions. It is a publication of the Society of St. James which is theologically conservative and seeks to present sound Christian scholarship to the public on a variety of issues.

Evangelical Philosophical Society: this sight is also loaded with many good articles and its blog is first class. It deals in a serious way with many different issues from an evangelical perspective with first rate scholarship.

NT Wright Articles: This web-site offers a collection of most of the works of NT Wright with the exception of his books which can all be found at www.amazon.com. or the like. NT Wright is probably the most well-known biblical scholar in the world today. He is also the Bishop of Durham in the Anglican Church and thus also sits in the British House of Lords in the British Parliament. I've been a familiar with him for over 20 years going back to his articles in Bible Review and his debates in the USA with the so-called Jesus Seminar. Since those times he has written hugely important and voluminous writings on Christian origins both at a scholarly and popular level. I've read most of these as they were published. His historical scholarship on early Judaism and Christianity against the background of the Roman empire builds on and expands the work of many earlier scholars and sets the proper understanding of Christianity in its true historical context. His writings, interviews, sermons, speeches, etc. are always interesting, very often enlightening, and sometimes maddening :) ! Though I often differ with some of the details of his biblical exposition (and of his politics), his overall understanding and presentation of the biblical message is very sound and is extremely refreshing coming from both the world of academia and the world of mainline Christianity. We hope to do a book review of his major books soon. There is little that Wright has not thought or written about and he is a staunch, articulate, and persuasive defender - and advocate - of biblical Christianity as it pertains to all areas of life.

The Paul Page: this sight that was begun and is run by Mark Mattison is dedicated to the discussion of the so-called "New Perspective on Paul". Briefly, this deals with endeavoring to understand Paul and his writings from within his own Jewish historical context. There are many flavors and aspects of this topic and this website offers a huge number of excellent articles from many different perspectives on this entire debate.

The next four web-sites listed on the right hand column are primarily devoted to detailed and academic research and study of the scriptures. They are all excellent for that purpose and taken together they seem to offer an almost limitless supply of information, leads, and links to serious biblical study.

Finally, I list a brief outline of a work by Phillip Johnson who was the driving force behind the intelligent design movement. This is a summary of the basic principles of intelligent design in contrast to those of Darwinian evolution. I know of no better resource for understanding the basics of the debate. This is followed by a web-site run by the Discovery Institute devoted to Intelligent Design and gives access to

most of the major books, articles, blogs, etc. associated with this school of thought. Anyone willing to take the time to explore this site and the related sites to which it links will find a wealth of information on this timely and extremely important topic.

I hope to start blogging on a weekly basis aiming at Mondays. I hope you'll check in and I look forward to hearing from you and growing together with you in Christ.

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