

## Biblical Principles of Civil Government.

Forefathers Monument stands proudly on a hill in the middle of a residential neighborhood in Plymouth. The grand lady of Faith standing 81 feet in the air overlooking Plymouth Harbor. On the front, her dedicatory plaque states:

*National Monument to the Forefathers,  
erected by a Grateful People, In  
Remembrance of their labors, sacrifices and  
sufferings for the cause of civil and  
religious liberty.*



All we have known is liberty. In fact, we take what we have for granted. However, we are the only people in history that have enjoyed such liberty and don't realize that we are on the verge of losing it. The point we will repeatedly see made by our founders and noted on this plaque is the close connection between civil and religious liberty. They are twins who travel together. If you lose one, you'll lose both.

John Witherspoon was one of the most influential men of the founding era. As the President of Princeton, 49 future Congressmen were educated by Witherspoon. In addition, 28 future Senators, 12 members of the Continental Congress, 3 future U. S. Supreme Court justices, one future Vice President and one future President all trained in a solid Biblical World View by the REVEREND John Witherspoon.

In fact, Reverend Witherspoon himself served in the Continental Congress and was a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Reverend Witherspoon stated:

*"There is not a single instance in history, in which civil liberty was lost and religious liberty preserved entire."*

Why would a Presbyterian preacher be speaking on such a topic? Remember the day in which he lived. Abortion was not the issue; it was unheard of. Homosexual marriage was not the issue of the day, it was unfathomable. The greatest issue and the greatest threat to Christianity in 1776 was civil and religious liberty.

We know this to be true. True Christianity has always been persecuted. Beginning in Acts 3, we see the church persecuted by the Sanhedrin, then by the pagan Roman Empire, then by the Holy Roman Catholic Empire throughout the Dark Ages. Even around the world today, Christianity is being persecuted in Moslem nations and Communist nations.

Only in America and only for the last 200 years has true Christianity been able to live and worship freely. Why? What has made America the exception?

### **The Goal of Tyranny—Government becomes Absolute**

In order to exercise complete control over a people, you must control the mind. The body is easy to control, if you first control the belief system of that body. That is why in totalitarian societies the government must control education and information (media). There can also be no freedom of conscience as there can be no higher authority to appeal to than the government. The government must become the absolute.

Consequently, in any tyranny, you either have an atheistic communism as once existed in the Soviet Union and currently exists in Communist China where there is no God — consequently, the government becomes god by default. It is the role of government to establish what is right and what is wrong. It is up to the government to provide rights to the people and also take them away. The government is the highest authority and assumes unquestioned, absolute control.

The other form of tyranny comes from a theocracy as exists today in Iran or Saudi Arabia. In this case, government and god are one and the same. The results are the same as in the communist philosophy. The theocratic government determines what is right and what is wrong. The government grants rights to the people and also takes them away. The government and god are one and the same, is the highest authority and assumes unquestioned, absolute control.

That is what Nimrod attempted to establish in ancient Babel. That is what Nebuchadnezzar did establish in Babylon when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego found themselves in the fiery furnace. And that is what King James 1 had successfully established in old England as he was the political leader, being the king. But he was also, the spiritual leader as the head of the Church of England. He assumed absolute control. If you disagreed with the king, not only was it heretical, but it was an act of treason. One could be imprisoned, tortured or put to death.

It was that that caused a church body in Scrooby, England, to risk their lives and leave the only world that they ever knew to board a little ship called the Mayflower and come to the New World.



## Principles of Government in the New World

The Pilgrims of 1620 were soon followed by the great Puritan migration. Our forefathers were free Englishmen. Ultimately, they answered to the King of England, but according to their charters they were free men able to elect their own governors and legislatures, enact their own laws and tax themselves if they deemed it necessary. Where did they go for instruction on principles of government?

Being families with a devout Biblical world view, the Puritans understood that God established three institutions on the earth. It was God who established the home. Consequently, they knew that God would have a lot to say about the form and proper function of the home in His divine Word. They knew that God established the church. Consequently, as they were not under the authority of the Church of England, they searched the Holy Scriptures for instruction on the design and function of their local Congregational churches. They also recognized that it was God who established human government. Obviously, God would have much input on the purpose, design and function of a proper human government.

The historian John Palfrey wrote in his ***“History of New England”*** (1859):

*“The Puritan searched the Bible, not only for principles and rules, but for mandates – and, when he could find none of these, for analogies – to guide him in precise arrangements of public administration, and in the minutest points of individual conduct.”*

In fact, Pastors were logically experts in the area of politics. Politics does not mean “Republican” or “Democrat”. The technical definition of the word politics even in modern dictionaries is “The art or science of government or governing.”

Logically, since God established civil government, He would have a lot to say about its proper form and function. Since pastors were supposed to be experts on the Word of God, they should also be well versed in God’s design and purpose for proper civil government. After a new legislature or council was elected a pastor would come to preach a charge and lay out the expectations and responsibilities of that elected in what was commonly called an “Election Sermon.” Alice Baldwin, in her 1928 work, ***“The New England Clergy and the American Revolution”*** states:

*“...these election sermons discussed the government of the ancient Hebrews and its excellencies; many were theoretical, concerned with the origin and end of government; some dealt more particularly with their own charters and the dearly won rights of Englishmen; some, with great freedom of speech, gave practical advice to the Assembly about well-known evils and desirable laws; the majority discussed in greater or less detail the qualities and the responsibilities of magistrates. Year after year the same themes were discussed; often the same*

*phraseology was used...Now and again there was an election preacher who was exceptionally direct and thorough-going in his discussion either of government of the agitations of the day, or of both...these sermons dealt with matters of government...(copies were distributed widely) where they became 'text books of politics.'"*

Many principles of government that we take for granted were actually Biblical truths unique to American government.

The Fundamental Principle that all men are created equal did not come from the Hindu caste system, Islam or the aristocracy of Old England. It was a Biblical truth emphasized during the Great Awakening that all men are equal at the foot of the cross.

The Concept of Natural Law and the monogamous family unit come from the Bible. Our laws of morality, ownership and rights of Private Property, a right to a fair trial, no conviction without two or three witnesses, a punishment that fits the crime all come from the Bible.

The Republican form of government comes from the Bible. As Moses was leading the Israelites to Canaan, he was stretched too thin. He wound up wearing himself out and was doing a disservice to the people. His father in law advised him that he needed help. Exodus 18:21 tells us, "Moreover thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them, to be rulers of thousands, and rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens."

Establishing a defined and written rule of law that was entered into by consent of the people did not originate in Old England. It originated in the Bible where the Law of Israel (The Torah) was their constitution that bound even the King as he was only authorized to govern within those defined boundaries. **Deuteronomy 17:18-20** states:

*"And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this law in a book out of that which is before the priests the Levites: And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them: That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left: to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he, and his children, in the midst of Israel."*

These principles and many others that we take for granted were Biblical truths incorporated into American civil law.

Why has America been exceptional? The original 13 colonies were built upon a strong Biblical world view.

## Three Biblical Principles that Shaped American Thought

Being free to govern themselves and having a solid Biblical World View, there were three basic Biblical Principles through which the founders viewed civil government.

### Principle #1: The purpose of government was for the good of the people.

The Puritans believed in the depravity of human nature and that the purpose of all government, whether that be self-government, family government, church government or civil government, was to maintain order and restrain wickedness.

In addition, they believed that since God established civil government, then the purpose of civil government was not to tyrannize or oppress the people, but for their good.

Pastor John Davenport of Boston in his 1663 sermon *“A Discourse on Civil Government”* states this about its purpose:

*“It was ordained of God, and its purpose, like the government of Christ and of God Himself, was the good of the people.”*

Pastor Nathaniel Appleton of Boston preached in a public lecture in 1757:

*“Government was instituted by God for the good of mankind. If a ruler acts selfishly or oppressively, He acts quite contrary to the original Design of Government and contrary to the express Will of Him from whence all Power and Authority are derived.”*

Where would these men get such ideas about government? The Bible, of course. Consider the truths explained in Romans 13, one of the most well-known passages on government.

#### **Romans 13:1-4**

*Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.*

God is not a God of anarchy and chaos. He is a God of justice and order. It was God that created civil government. Does that mean that every existing government is of his design and in His will? Of course not.

Consider, as an example, the family. God established the family. It is God’s design for a man, with his eyes fixed on Jesus, to join together with a woman, with her eyes fixed on Jesus, in the sacred union of marriage, to be faithful to one another until death parts them and to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Unfortunately, man has a way of making a mess out of things and we see broken homes every day. That is not a problem with God’s design or intent. That is a problem with man’s disobedience and self-will.



The same holds true for the institution of civil government. God established it. It was His idea. And the purpose, according to **Romans 13** is to punish evil and protect the good.

*For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.*

Peter repeats the same truth in **1 Peter 2:13-14**:

*Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.*

And Paul puts the finishing touches on the purpose of government in **1 Timothy 2:1-2**:

*I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.*

**Clearly, the will of God for government is to punish the evil and protect the good that we may live peaceably in all godliness. Government is for the good of man.**

**Principle #2: There is a standard of Absolute Truth. There is right and wrong. Man is Subject to Natural Law.**

Thomas Jefferson opens our ***Declaration of Independence*** with this word:

*When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.*

The whole basis upon which this act of separation was justified is “*the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God*”. Is that simply some poetic phrase from an 18th Century author? No. The terms in the Declaration are actually legal terms defined in Blackstone’s Commentaries on the Law.

Sir William Blackstone was an English Jurist who published his four volume Commentaries on English Law. This became the cornerstone of American Law.



Regarding Natural Law, Blackstone states:

*“Man, considered as a creature, must necessarily be subject to the laws of his Creator, for he is entirely a dependent being ... And consequently, as man depends absolutely upon his Maker for everything, it is necessary that he should in all points conform to his Maker's will. This will of his Maker is called the law of nature... The doctrines thus delivered we call the revealed or divine law, and they are to be found only in the holy scriptures. ...no human laws should be suffered to contradict these.”*

Natural Law included such things as are observable in nature like the law of gravity or the right to defend your property. Try taking a grizzly bear cub away from its mother and you’ll quickly learn a thing or two about defending your family and home. But Natural law also included God’s moral law which was contained “*only in the holy scriptures.*”

As Blackstone stated, the Biblical World View of our founders believed that when God had spoken the matter was settled. Man was only free to enact law where God hadn’t already spoken.



An original member of the U. S. Supreme Court and a signer of the Constitution, James Wilson stated:

*“...It should always be remembered that this law, natural or revealed, made for men or for nations, flows from the same Divine source: it is the law of God. . . . Human law must rest its authority ultimately upon the authority of that law which is Divine.”*

And Alexander Hamilton, signer of the Constitution and a principle author of the Federalist Papers said:



*[T]he law . . . dictated by God Himself is, of course, superior in obligation to any other. It is binding over all the globe, in all countries, and at all times. No human laws are of any validity if contrary to this.*

No human laws are of any validity if they violate God's law. So, for example, what should the speed limit be on Broadway Avenue? Well, there is no place in Holy Scripture from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22 that tells us what the speed limit should be.

Therefore, our civil political body is free to determine what a safe and efficient speed limit should be for Broadway. However, what is the definition of marriage? According the pages of Holy Scripture it is one man and one woman. When God has spoken, the matter is settled and the created has no business or right to overrule the Creator.

What common sense that is!! However, we have seemingly lost our common sense in this day and age. Consider the simple wisdom from yesteryear. The Reverend Joseph Alden authored a public-school textbook on government and citizenship in 1869. (Remember: Pastors were experts on civil government since it was God's idea).

Page twelve asks the question:

*"Do laws which restrain a man from doing wrong infringe upon his liberty?"*

The answer:

*"They do not; for he has no right to do wrong."*



16. *What should determine the form of a nation's government?*

The character and circumstances of the people.

17. *For what nations is a republic the best form?*

Those in which the people are intelligent and moral.

18. *Why are representatives chosen?*

Because all the people of a nation cannot meet together, and make laws.

19. *For what other reason?*

Because men selected on account of their wisdom are best qualified to make laws.

20. *To whom are the representatives responsible?*

To the people and to God.

21. *Do wise and just laws interfere with liberty?*

They do not. Civil liberty is the result of law.

22. *What can men reasonably claim?*

Liberty to do right, and protection against wrong.

23. *Do laws which restrain a man from doing wrong infringe on his liberty?*

They do not; for he has no right to do wrong.

24. *What would perfectly wise laws require?*

They would require men to do what is just.

25. *What would they prohibit?*

Everything unjust.

26. *What would be the result of perfectly wise laws faithfully executed?*

Every one would be at liberty to do right, and would be secure from wrong.

27. *If one was free to do right, and secure against wrong, what would he have?*

Perfect liberty.

We live in a day of black rights, white rights, women's rights, homosexual rights, etc. The truth is that we are given certain unalienable rights from God, but no one has a right to do wrong!!

What simple, brilliant logic that has been lost on the modern generation.

Along this same line of thought, let me expound upon the term “*pursuit of happiness*” as that is a specific unalienable right from God and articulated in our Declaration of Independence. I have heard that expression used to defend all sorts of perverse and sinful behavior with the defense that they are simply pursuing happiness. That is exactly the opposite of what the term actually means.

Let us again refer to Blackstone’s Commentaries on Law:

*For he (God) has so intimately connected, so inseparably interwoven the laws of eternal justice with the happiness of each individual, that the latter cannot be attained but by observing the former; and, if the former be punctually obeyed, it cannot but induce the latter. In consequence of which mutual connection of justice and human felicity (happiness), he has not perplexed the law of nature with a multitude of abstracted rules and precepts, referring merely to the fitness or unfitness of things, as some have vainly surmised; but has graciously reduced the rule of obedience to this one paternal precept, "that man should pursue his own true and substantial happiness." This is the foundation of what we call ethics, or natural law.*

We have a God given right to life and no government or individual can arbitrarily deprive you of your life. You may forfeit your right to life if you commit some capital crime, but it can’t legally just be taken from you.

We have a God given right to liberty and no government or individual can arbitrarily deprive you of your liberty. You may forfeit it if you commit some crime that results in your arrest and incarceration, but you can’t simply be deprived of your liberty without due process.

We also have a right to discern and walk in God’s will enjoying all the blessings that God has in store for us according to Scripture. This would include our right to own property, buy, sell, work, raise a family, enjoy liberty and most importantly the right to worship God according to the dictates of your heart as revealed in Holy Scripture and no government or individual can deprive you of that right.

**There is absolute truth. There is right and wrong. There is a foundation upon which America was built. That is “The Laws of Nature and Nature’s God” – a Biblical Worldview. Rights come from God. No one has a right to do wrong.**

### Principle #3: The Importance of Compact for a Civil Society

If all men are created equal, then who has the right to rule over another man? Obviously, the answer is “no one.” If a man lived all by himself, he would have no need of creating a civil government. Let us refer once again to Sir William Blackstone and the world view of our founding fathers for more about the necessity of civil government.

*“If man were to live in a state of nature, unconnected with other individuals, there would be no occasion for any other laws, that the law of nature and the law of God...But man was formed for society...is neither capable of living alone, nor indeed has the courage to do it.”*

In other words, if man lived in alone, then he would have no need for any civil law. For example, if I lived on a deserted island all by myself then I would have no need to put up a traffic light as there is no cross traffic. I am the only one living there. However, I would still be subject to God’s laws, such as the law of gravity, and I would still be subject to God’s laws of morality.

But free and equal men, when choosing to live in a community (civil body) must create or constitute a law to govern their interaction and delegate few and defined powers to this civil political body. This was why the Pilgrims found it absolutely necessary to draft and sign the Mayflower Compact before disembarking from the Mayflower.

Pastor John Davenport of Boston in his 1669 Election sermon said:

*But man is a social creature and men being “combined in a Family-Society; it is necessary that they be joyned (sic) in a Civil-Society;...through the manner of Union, in a Political Body. This power of rulers of the Common-wealth is derived from the People’s free Choice...for the Power of the Government is originally (originates) in the People...that they may measure out so much Civil Power...that they give it out conditionally, upon this of that condition; so as if the condition be violated, they may resume their power of chusing (sic) another.”*

Alice Baldwin summarized the political thought in her classic work ***The New England Clergy and the American Revolution***:

*“Here is government set up by the people and resting upon their consent; magistrates chosen by the majority and strictly limited in power cannot be used against the rights and liberties of the people, removable by the people if the conditions set by them be violated.”*

God gives unalienable rights to man. Man, choosing to live in a community agree to enter into a covenant, charter or constitution, designing the makeup of the political body while delegating and defining certain limited responsibilities to this political body.

However, the power always rests in the hands of “We the people.” If the political body violates its defined and limited responsibility, it is recallable by the ones who created it.

Consider the words of the founder of Connecticut, Pastor Thomas Hooker in his 1638 letter to John Winthrop:

*“...the foundation of authority is laid, firstly, in the free consent of the people.”*

Who is in charge? We the people.

Consider the words of Pastor Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island:

*“The sovereign, original, and foundation of civil power lies in the people; and it is evident that such governments as are by them erected and established, have no more power, nor for no longer time, that the civil power or people consenting and agreeing shall betrust them with.”*

Who maintains the power? We the people.

It is with this knowledge, that the member of the Constitutional Convention did their work in 1787. The Colonies had just fought to liberate themselves from tyranny. The last thing they wanted to do was create another tyrant. There was strong disagreement between the Federalists who favored the Constitution and the Anti-Federalists who were fearful of establishing a new Federal Government that might grow into a tyrant.

The Federalist Papers were a series of newspaper articles published in New York arguing on behalf of the ratification of the new Constitution. **Federalist #45** tried to give calm assurance to the Anti-Federalists that the Federal Government could never grow outside of its boundaries because its responsibilities were limited and clearly defined.

*The powers delegated by the proposed Constitution to the federal government, are few and defined. Those which are to remain in the State governments are numerous and indefinite. The former will be exercised principally on external objects, as war, peace, negotiation, and foreign commerce; with which last the power of taxation will, for the most part, be connected. The powers reserved to the several States will extend to all the objects which, in the ordinary course of affairs, concern the lives, liberties, and properties of the people, and the internal order, improvement, and prosperity of the State.*

*The operations of the federal government will be most extensive and important in times of war and danger; those of the State governments, in times of peace and security. As the former periods will probably bear a small proportion to the latter, the State governments will here enjoy another advantage over the federal government. The more adequate, indeed, the federal powers may be rendered to the national defense, the less frequent will be those scenes of danger which might favor their ascendancy over the governments of the particular States.*

The powers delegated to the Federal Government by the states were clearly articulated and limited. In case there was ever any misunderstanding the Ninth and Tenth Amendments put exclamation points on who holds what power.

**Amendment IX:** *The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.*

**Amendment X:** *The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people.*

But what would happen if the Federal Government began to exercise too much power? Who was to determine what was excessive? Not the Supreme Court, but WE THE PEOPLE. Consider what Federalist Paper #33 has to say about this very question.

*“And it is expressly to execute these (certain specified) powers that the sweeping clause, as it has been affectedly called, authorizes the national legislature to pass all necessary and proper laws...But it may be again asked, Who is to judge of the necessity and propriety of the laws to be passed for executing the powers of the Union? ... If the federal government should overpass the just bounds of its authority and make a tyrannical use of its powers, the people, whose creature it is, must appeal to the standard they have formed, and take such measures to redress the injury done to the Constitution as the exigency may suggest and prudence justify.”*

Notice that even a Federalist like Alexander Hamilton clearly acknowledged that the Federal Government was created by and the creature of the sovereign states and it was up to the people (not the Supreme Court) to determine whether an action by Washington was necessary or proper.

Again, consider this thought. The Constitution was an agreement between the sovereign states creating and limiting the Federal government. Would the Founders give sole authority to their new creation to define its own power? Of course not.

Why do we think a branch of the Federal government (the Supreme Court) will be a fair arbiter in determining the authority of the Federal government?

In my younger years, I played football from little league through five seasons in the NFL. I never had the ability to call penalties on the opposing team. If I had been given that power, I can assure you that I never would have lost a game.

How do we justify appealing to a branch of the Federal government to reign in the Federal government?

When you consider the Roe V. Wade and Obergefell decisions, we realize an overreaching Federal government generally IS the problem!

Let's summarize what we've learned so far.

1. The purpose of the civil government is not to rule over or tyrannize the people, but for the good of the people.
2. We have a standard of truth - a foundation – natural law.
3. No Law can contradict God's Law. No one has the right to do wrong.
4. God grants rights. The purpose of civil government is to ensure those God given rights. Man, in order to protect his life, liberty and property, and in order to live in a civil society enters into a covenant entrusting certain limited powers to the proper authority – of, by and for the people (Ex. 18:21)
5. A man may not give away something that he does not possess
6. The government derives its power by the consent of the governed and is limited to the powers entrusted to it and cannot break the law nor overstep the powers entrusted to it.