

## **Get Wisdom! Program**

### **“Does the Bible Require Civil Authority to Regulate a Biblical Life?”**

Ronald Kirk  
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A fundamental of Biblical hermeneutics is system. Any answer is found in the whole of Scripture.

What is God’s ultimate purpose? It is to restore man to relationship with Him unto eternity (Deut. 6:5, 10:12). Relationship requires whole individuals (uncompromised). Christ is the bridge between the absolutely holy God and sinful man. Thus, in God’s eternal purpose, He uses this life to produce men of substantial character, proven character (Rom 5:1-5).

Law is for the lawless (1 Tim 1:9). Children are born lawless in sin and so God places them in families for the positive Biblical law of child training. Good change takes time. Children are not merely commanded to the path, but trained, cultivated. Since relationship is fundamental to the eternal, a parent and teacher are not merely taskmasters, but also friends. We do not seek to form “good” people in an external sense, but to help them understand our thorough flawed-ness and to know Jesus Christ in Whom we live and move and have our being.

How the mature man of God appears when thoroughly prepared is central to your question. He is a man who puts God first. He possesses a character capable of trusting God and walking by faith against his own predisposition to question God under original sin. He is capable of loving His neighbor as himself. In forming these qualities, the family is central.

The church as institution is also central in reciprocal relationship with the home. The church is essentially an educational institution (Eph 4:11-13). It possesses some positive authority, but less than the family—the disciplines of education in the Word and its application. When the family and the church are doing their job, little civil correction is needed, because the man of God walks in restraint as a shock absorber against the evil of a sinful world, and he is salt and light.

The first sphere of civil government is thus civil manners—the individual treatment of neighbors and its corollary Christian influence. Here it behooves men of God to be thoroughly furnished, having studied every subject Biblically so that we are ready to give an answer. The Law/Word of God provides everything needed in this education.

Then the work must be accomplished by the ministers of God (all Christians), trained in the home and church. This work is so diverse as to be infinite, humanly speaking. Here we observe the Biblical federal principle (NOT Federal Vision!) inherent in “love God; love your neighbor.” This, with the equal ultimacy of the One and the Many as a reflection of the doctrine and reality of the Holy Trinity, provides the basic relational basis for the Christian’s universal work in the world. Here America’s unique, providential example is important. Remember, the goal is a tested character of faith and faithfulness into eternity.

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In all this, liberty is essential. First liberty from the damaging effects of internal sin, and then freedom to exercise our gifts and callings in Christ. For the highest expression, this requires a godly civil order. Thus a fundamental purpose of the Mosaic Law is the removal of evil from the midst of the people (Deut 13:5).

The Bible exalts godly liberty, translated such 24 times in the NKJV and 25 in KJV (1 Cor 7:23).

As to some specifics applied to the civil sphere, then, the Law is for Lawless. God gave the original seed of civil government in Genesis 9:6, an essentially negative law. God restored the knowledge of the Law to the slavish Israelites through Moses. Its essence is the Ten Commandments—negative.

Even in the slavish condition of the Israelites, God did not give them a high central magistrate, but a decentralized priesthood, Levitical order, and spheres of judiciary.

We do see a positive element in the law of the parapet wall (Deut 22:8). This establishes the principle of tort. Under the Law, we must not be negligent, but take thoughtful measures not to expose our neighbors to unnecessary hazards. However, the application of this law is negative. That is, we do not see that the civil authority enforces the providing of a parapet. We do see that the civil authority provides legal remediation in damages for such things. A parallel is the provision for out-of-control cattle.

The Law of Moses is arguably special in many aspects—designed for an extremely slavish people in a world of desperately sinful influence. In many ways, the Mosaic law is designed to reinforce the consciousness of sin for example (sin can cost you your bull!). As far as I am aware, there is only one just capital exaction for Sabbath breaking in Scripture. It was early in the Law, where even apparently small infractions could do great harm. Even here, Moses second guesses the capital nature of the event by going specifically to God for instruction. He was reluctant. The NT mitigates the severity of the Law (Mark 2:27; Romans 14:4-6).

I have frequently heard argument from Covenanters that the kings of Israel used positive law—regulation. I am not sure where they think this is true outside of limited action to restore the Temple or to destroy places of idol worship. But neither of these is regulatory. Moreover, I argue that the high magistracy of the monarchy was itself God’s concession to particular sinfulness and not exemplary of His purpose. God gives the government the people required by their sinfulness or more free institutions to those capable of essential self-government and justice. This providential concession finds its parallel in Christ’s saying that divorce was not so from the beginning, but granted due to the hardness of men’s hearts. Divorce is a lesser of evils, as the kings in Israel were. Finally, even the latter good kings with all their external power effected little good in the people long term.

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The great challenge in Christian history has not been too much freedom when the people were prepared for it, but of the magistrates taking too much liberty to themselves unto abuse, justifying in the divine right of kings all kinds of enormities against the people they should have represented in holy trust. Somehow, the worst men tend to positions of power. The American Christian answer has been to limit human authority, especially through localizing, while maximizing liberty and justice.

You cannot establish God’s long-term purpose with mere general authority. General authority will tend to weaken the people under it. This is so, because the more external coercion, the less invested the man under authority becomes. Appropriately Rushdoony often cites the schizophrenic nature of authority with a tendency toward authoritarianism at the top and slavish resistance at the bottom. The more top-down liturgy a church practices, with emphasis on the elders and sacraments, for example, the weaker the congregation becomes. This is the tendency in Federal Vision churches I have known. This is so, because the people do not have opportunities to exercise their faith under church auspices. It is the very weakness and downfall of original Romanism. By the way, contemporary patriarchalism has the same problem. Brute exaction leads to rebellion.

In our school, we used to say, “If it’s the easy way it is probably the wrong way.” God requires faithful patience. God requires wisdom as against simplicity. Otherwise, in our attempt at expediency—such as the use of the magistrate to effect positive good—we take over and ruin and His good work, which takes time. Jesus said the kingdom comes without observation because, though our partnership is required and real, it is ultimately His work.