

To Be a Theocracy or Not to Be a Theocracy? by Ronald Kirk

Was early Christian America a theocracy? Should Christians desire a theocracy? What *is* a theocracy? What are the differences between the Biblical notion of theocracy and the American republic?

Part of the problem with these questions is the wild variation of meaning attached to the term *theocracy*. Meaning is further complicated by the negative connotation or spin propagated by its opponents, both Christian and non-Christian. For example, among militant non-Christians, it is great fashion to associate the term theocracy with the tyrannical Sharia law of Islam (though liberals are increasingly countenancing it). Christians often seem to interpret theocracy as a coercive, top-down civil order.¹ Another difficulty is theological confusion. For example, Noah Webster in his *1828 American Dictionary of the English Language* says that theocracy is: Government of a state by the immediate direction of God; or the state thus governed. Of this species the Israelites furnish an illustrious example. The theocracy lasted till the time of Saul. Noah Webster is my constant resort, but here I must disagree with him. Under God's providence, it is virtually impossible to externally enforce any civil order without the mediation of men. Thus, a direct theocracy is not possible. If it was, it would contradict God's purpose to bring volunteers unto Himself (Ps. 110:3). As it has always been God's intent to govern mankind, all of history might be considered a theocracy, though mostly of men in rebellion to it.

True enough, the term theocracy in its roots means essentially *governed by God*. And yes, ancient Israel is the only Biblical example of a would-be direct rule by God. God covenanted directly with Israel through Moses and later through His prophets. He gave His Law through Moses. However, even then this Law was not imposed from the top down. From the very beginning, the people gave unanimous and public consent to God's provisions for them (Ex. 19:7-8).

God did not wish to establish Himself among them through some divine-right king or man-god, as many of the ancient pagan rulers characterized themselves (e.g. Isaiah 14). Rather, God warned that such a king would end up a self-serving dictator (1 Sam. 8). This was never God's intent. Rather, God's rule is always in the form of a covenant with men, and godly men desire His benign rule. Certainly, God uses certain representative intermediaries including priests, prophets, judges and magistrates. In debased times, he even uses kings (1 Sam 8:6-7). Leaders are necessary according to capability of sinful men to live for God and on His terms. When the people are capable, God gives a restrained governor who rules in the fear of Him (Neh. 5:15). Ultimately, God purposes to establish a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6, 1 Pet. 2:9).

Yes, early Israel—made to be slaves for 400 years in Egypt—acquired a slavish character. God therefore imposed a strict external discipline to help keep Israel separate from pagan influences, and with a full concentration on their sin, and their need of God. This so that His *grace* might prevail among them. God gives the kind of civil government

their general character requires—dictatorship or even outright destruction if a poor character, or liberty and self-government to a people of virtuous character. Though external discipline over ancient Israel was necessary for their own good, the Great Commandments were to love God (Deut. 6:5) and love one's neighbor (Lev. 19:18).

Even under the good king David, Israel's status as a people governed by God depended on their personal virtue. David could never be the peoples' conscience, faith, character, or virtue. Neither could the priests be. The ritual and symbolic laws were disciplinary (educational) means taken by God to form a people—a people made of individuals willing and capable of loving God, and of self-government.

If Israel would not have resisted and rebelled, but rather let God so form them, the theocracy would have flourished. With many people standing for God in holiness, ready to live as He would have them, justice, liberty and goodness would flourish in society. Ultimately civil government would be a benign reflection of the people and would *represent* them. One of my favorite positive prophecies is that their nobles (leaders) would be from among them (i.e. true representatives—Jeremiah 30:21). The Israeli theocracy, though it left a positive legacy upon which God would build His Kingdom (in Christ), it was a failed theocracy. Grace must do what the Law cannot (Gal. 2:21).

In fact, it should be evident that a centralized or dictatorial power of government could never form a true theocracy. Why? Where does God's kingdom lie? It lies in the heart of men. Upon man's fall, God immediately implemented His eternal plan of redemption, a people prepared unto Him for eternity. This kingdom is first and necessarily internal. Even Jesus' disciples made the mistake of thinking at first that the kingdom should be a political one. Thus, they thought, Jesus would first defeat Rome, and then establish His rule on earth by force. This was not and is not His way (not in the Millennium either). In other words, God rules from the heart of man outward. Properly speaking every act of the Christian should come from the motive of God's love, with dependence upon His help. (Here is why early education is so critically important. Childhood is the time when the capacity for self-government is formed, and is best formed by constant, careful cultivation.)

Psalm 110, the most quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament, indicates that Jesus will rule at the right hand of the Father, in the midst of His enemies, and through His volunteers (the peoples of God, Christ's body). This situation will remain until the Father makes all Jesus' enemies His footstool. The Bible says the last enemy is death.

To get to the core of the issue, theocracy essentially means a government by or under God. Is this not what we mean when we say Jesus is Lord? The kingdom can truly only be God's kingdom when it emerges in the real lives of His converted disciples. Internal qualities *will* express themselves. With this understanding, for Christians, divine-right kings and deified despots are completely excluded. We thus reject such an institutional theocracy. God's theocracy is through the covenantal union of many individuals, where He rules individually in each heart. Then, the people require little external government

and liberty is the rule. “You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men” (1 Cor. 7:23), not even Christian men.

Now we come to America...

Our founding fathers sought God to govern them—God is America’s King—through self-restrained Christians intending to protect liberty and justice for everyone. This is theocracy in its fundamental sense. Anything short of this is destined to fail (under humanistic sin), for only when the righteous rule, do the people rejoice (Prov. 29:2).²

How do men know what is God’s purpose—what content should rule in their individual and eventually their corporate lives? It is the Bible, taken as God’s authoritative will. Paul said to walk in a manner worthy of our calling. How well we hit the mark, by faith and with the help of the Holy Spirit, determines how successful we will be. In ourselves, this is impossible. We depend upon God to bring the increase.

Again, the problem with any *institutional* theocracy is the very real and likely danger for do-gooder demagogues to make right through might, something our founders rejected absolutely. This appears to be the condition in the highest halls of American government at this time. That is exactly the Europe our founders escaped. They trusted God to trust Americans to do the right thing voluntarily. America’s government is self-government (dependent upon God). If many individuals are themselves governed by God, they will govern on His behalf for everyone’s good.

A theocracy in the unbiblical, pejorative sense is one where a man or group of men claim to speak for God and impose their view on others. This isn’t even the theocracy of ancient Israel. When this occurred in Israel, it was rebellion, utter decadence and sin, and God judged it as such.

No one I know among those who believe in the early American view of theocracy seeks central control to force God on others. No, we seek government to return to its original purpose in America—to protect life, liberty and property—to provide justice, so that God’s people may fulfill their individual callings in the context of a holy, covenantal community. Aside from the bully pulpit of moral authority such as Paul the Apostle applied to himself and so argued (the whole of 2 Corinthians), civil government has little legitimate authority beyond establishing justice. The Bible commands men to put evil away from their midst.³

By the way, America’s founders never intended for America to be a democracy. America’s present democracy is the result of the good guys avoiding responsibility and leaving a spiritual vacuum in the heart of American life. Democracy amounts to mob rule. Whoever can gain the majority, usually through ugly power-politics, can determine life for everyone else. I have read that the founders considered democracy the worst form of government.⁴ Rather, ours was a covenantal (constitutional), representative, republic. There are many difference between democracy and a Christian republic, but the essentials are local self-government, true representation, and limited government. The *effect* of the

difference is the very difference between Europe's character and history, and early America's character and history. Europe became effete, while America grew quickly into the greatest nation ever known. This was true, though soon after the Constitution was founded, the foundations began to erode. The founders expected their children to grow in wisdom and grace to administer the republic. Instead, we have squandered its blessing on ourselves. Christians are essentially at fault, for from the time of the Constitution, Christians increasingly and until now virtually universally, abandoned the public sphere as unholy. Consequently, we now submit to the wicked ruling and the people groaning. From where will the righteous come to rule, if Christians do not universally assume stewardship of the great (internal and covenantal) theocracy America once represented?

The answer then is for Christian individuals to allow God's theocracy to rule in their hearts and lives, in all facets. For whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, we ought to do all to the glory of God. As increasing numbers of Christians so give their lives to Him and fulfill their callings within the spheres He has granted them, God will exert influence, by His Spirit, until His mountain fills the whole earth (Daniel 2:32). This means re-acquiring the Biblical knowledge, wisdom and skill necessary to administer free institutions in every sphere. Those capable of governing themselves may govern a family. Those capable of governing a family may govern a church. Those capable of governing a church may govern a city. Those capable of governing a city may govern a state or nation.⁵ After the home, the local church is the most apt place to begin to learn Christian liberty and leadership in practice (Eph. 4:11-13). With covenantal individuality, liberty with union, as the basic premise of the Kingdom, the implications to the institutional, local church should be obvious. Where else will the people of God in an extended community learn to be His representatives, His leaders, for the good of men and the glory of God?

As an educator of young people myself, one of my favorite poems is Julia Fletcher Carney's "Little Things":

Little drops of water,
Little grains of sand,
Make the mighty oceans
And the pleasant land.

So the little moments,
Humble though they be,
Make the mighty ages
Of eternity.

So our little errors
Lead the soul away
From the paths of virtue
Far in sin to stray

Little deeds of kindness,

Little words of love,
Help to make earth happy
Like the heavens above.⁶

I think Mrs. Carney might have had Jesus' prayer in mind: "Thy Kingdom come. They will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

(Special thanks to Karen B. for inspiring this article!)

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¹ The internet is rife with Christian, anti-theocratic and theonomic (referring to God's Law Word) blogs. For example, Theocracy Watch (<http://www.theocracywatch.org/>), with Church of Christ and Episcopal members (http://www.theocracywatch.org/about_us2.htm).

² See Jerry Newcombe, *The Book that Made America: How the Bible Formed Our Nation* (Ventura: Nordskog Publishing, Inc., 2009), for ample material as to the Biblical basis of America (<http://nordskogpublishing.com/book-america.shtml>).

³ E.g. Deuteronomy 17:7, which is in the context of punishment for capital crimes. See *Death Penalty on Trial: Taking a Life for a Life Taken* (Ventura, CA.: Nordskog Publishing Inc., 2009), http://nordskogpublishing.com/book-death_penalty_on_trial.shtml.

⁴ For example, James Madison proclaimed in *The Federalist* Number 10, "Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths." *The Federalist*, (Springfield, VA: Global Affairs Publishing Company, 1987), p. 49.

⁵ This is essentially a paraphrase of a quote by Hugo Grotius, as found in Rosalie Slater, *Teaching and Learning America's Christian History: The Principle Approach* (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1975), p. 119, and reflects Proverbs 16:32.

⁶ From Burton Egbert Stevenson, *The Home Book of Verse for Young Folks*, (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1957), p. 110.