

## Government (Part Four)

The Government Today

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We have been on the subject of government, and I am going to be continuing that today. I was thinking this week that there are many subjects that could be easily explained in short order, given a brief period of instruction, and that combined with a little bit of lab work—or, maybe some practical experience—then, "Presto! Change-o. We've got it!" But government is **not** one of these subjects.

For anyone who is sincerely seeking answers, questions involving government become so many. There are so many nuances, that it is almost incredible. Late in his life, Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong told Dr. Hoeh (who, in turn, told the Ministerial Refresher Program—of which I was a part, at the time) that, "The subject of government has been the most difficult of all Bible doctrines."

Now, some things about government are very easily seen, and we may readily agree and say, "Yes. That is correct." But, at the same time, these things that we readily see are not easy **to do**. For example, last week in the sermon we saw very clearly that, under the New Covenant, we are to be subject to the civil governments of men. Though they are not the government that we are directly responsible to, and though they may be corrupt and oppressive, their authority—according to Romans 13—is derived directly from God. So, being obedient to them is being obedient to God. Maybe I had better change that. *Being **subject to** them is being obedient to God.*

Peter, though, added something to that. He said that we are to be subject to every ordinance of man—because (1) we are the servants of God and (2) we are to do it "for the Lord's sake." That is, out of regard for Him.

Here is one of those ordinances of men that are easily understood, quickly accepted, but difficult to do. What about the speed limit laws? That is one that we have a very great deal of difficulty, most of the time, living with—if our "practice" is any indication. We will make all kinds of justifications to defend what we do. (That is, going over the limits.) We will reason, "Well, that speed was established for foul weather conditions; and now the weather is good." Or, "That speed was set for heavy rush-hour traffic; and now it's three a.m., and nobody else is around. I'm the only one on the road." Or, "If I don't move at the speed everybody else is, I'll be a hazard and be a cause of accidents."

Now, indeed, there are occasions when exceeding the speed limit is totally justifiable. But, as a normal way of operation, what kind of a signal does that send to God in regard to our *attitude* toward law? That is, our **attitude** and **practices** regarding law and government. Is that being faithful in even the little things? Are we openly telling God that we will not be faithful in the big things (if we cannot even submit to this little thing)?

I think that it is right here that we meet with the main factors that are, in reality, causing most governmental problems. There are two of them. One of them is **not** the structure of government! I think that God, in His Word, clearly shows *the structure* that works best. But I think that history also shows us that almost any structure of government will work. However, some work better than others do. The major problems lie elsewhere, than the structure.

Whether we are *in* authority or *under* authority (and we are **always** under authority), each of us—male or female—has an almost overpowering unwillingness to live within the limits imposed by the "governor." Remember that! What I have done is simply rephrased, or paraphrased, Romans 8:7. "The carnal mind [the natural mind] is enmity against God." And, as we saw in last week's sermon, He is the Ultimate Source of government. So, the civil governments of men derive their authority **from God**—as does the authority within the family structure also derive its authority **from God**.

So, we find in human beings that there is an almost overwhelming unwillingness to live within the limits imposed by the "governor." When we extrapolate from God, this same unwillingness is transposed *against* the civil government, or *against* the head of the family, or *against* anybody who happens to be in authority. This is something that we have to be aware of, and to keep ourselves disciplined so that we do not allow this urge (this pull, this unwillingness that is within us) to get the better of us.

We want to be free to set our own limits. And when some decree begins to impose upon what we *ourselves* have set, then we begin to fudge—saying, "It really doesn't matter all that much." And, if we really feel urgent about this thing, we will then openly break it. In this case, we will use such terminology as: "Nobody's going to pull my strings." Or, "This is the way it's going to be done, or I won't do it." (Or, "...it won't be done at all.") Or, "I'm going to control this." Or, "This isn't so bad; it's just a little thing, and it's not going to hurt anybody else." Or, "I have the right to this kind of respect."

I will tell you—the *pain* that this has caused! God has given us the history in the Bible. In addition to that, we have six thousand years of man's history to show us that this does not work, except to produce miserable, fearful, frustrating, painful, and hopeless lives for all concerned. We have spent a lifetime convincing ourselves that *what we do* does not matter.

But "there ain't no free lunch." That is what comes out in the Bible. There is really no such thing (in regard to government) that does not have some effect—especially when it involves God's spiritual law. And when you get almost six billion people saying "It really doesn't matter," we find ourselves to the place where we are almost to the point of making ourselves extinct.

It is when a person will not live within the limits, let us say, in regards to food that his body is able to metabolize and to use that one gains weight. It is when a person will not live within moderate limits of alcohol consumption that one gets drunk. It is when one will not live within the limits regarding sex that fornication and adultery occur. The same principle holds true for every commandment and principle of God's natural and spiritual law. And nothing will change until each individual changes **to God's way** regardless of what other people do.

In this whole series of sermons that I have given on government, it is right here that the sermon that I gave on the day of Pentecost fits. I titled that sermon "The Right Use Of Power." Now rehearse with me, just briefly:

God created us. He gave us dominion (rule, or authority) over His creation. He gave us the "gifts" necessary to carry out this dominion. And, in this case, it was primarily **the spirit in man**—by which we possess intellect (which the other creatures, that God created, do not have).

God then gave us a goal towards which to orient our life, and our gifts, and we have (by the record—in this Book and in man's history) miserably failed to make use of what He gave to us.

Very quickly, again in Genesis 6, He shows us an ultimate conclusion—just in "type" or in "symbol"—when the Flood came and wiped out all life on earth. They were all going in the wrong direction. Everyone had failed to live within the limits that God established. And God just let it run its course. But, in very short order, He had to step in—or the minds would have become so perverted that repentance and conversion (and acceptance of *His rule*) never would have been possible.

It is so simply told there, in the beginning. A man and a woman, a beautiful Garden, a place to live, an environment that would probably make us *gasp* with admiration. God established one limit (as far as we are able to see): "You can eat all of the trees that are in the Garden [here comes the limit:] except one tree." They could not live within that limit.

This unwillingness that is in each of us is very powerful, and it has to be lived with. It has to be **overcome**, or we just simply will not live.

Now, get this—listen very carefully: Under the New Covenant, God has removed every impediment between Him and us. Spiritually, we are face to face with God, even as Adam and Eve were face to face, physically, with God in the Garden.

The smallest unit of government is *the individual*, and God is dealing with each one of us on this most basic of all levels. In God's form of government, *the individual is very important*—because **by faith** *the individual* must keep himself submitted to God.

I think that this is very clearly illustrated by the fact that, under the New Covenant, it is made *with individuals*—in contrast to the Old Covenant that was made with the whole nation of Israel, all at one time. It is under the New Covenant that *individuals* are immersed, or installed, into His church by the Spirit of God (which is given to those who obey Him). Again, in contrast with what happened under the Old Covenant, [where] those people were born into that relationship with God.

Brethren, even God's government will not work (except by sheer force) **unless** the governed *consent*, and then *willingly submit* in obedience to Him. That is something that must be voluntarily done! God does not want to use sheer force, and neither do you want Him to use it. Why? Because both of us understand that that does not produce *liberty*.

Mahatma Gandhi (the Indian whose civil activities brought a measure of independence to India) had wise insight into this fact. Listen to this quote from him: "Good government [and by that, he meant good civil government, national government, local government] is no substitute for self-government."

God expects us to learn to govern ourselves!

We are going to string together a series of scriptures here. I will not make a great deal of comment on these; but I want you to see (just by this series of scriptures) how God is dealing with us *as individuals*.

**John 6:44** No one [And He means that—No one! Not one single person] can come to Me [Christ is the Speaker] unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.

Can you see that? It is so clear. You are not a cipher to God. He knows you. And He called you out of almost six billion people who are on earth. He chose you to be here.

**Matthew 22:1-3** And Jesus answered and spoke to them again by parables and said:  
"The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son [The Marriage of the Lamb, eventually, to the church.], and sent out his servants to call those [Remember the calling—John 6:44.] who were invited to the wedding; and they were not willing to come.

This is *by invitation*! You do much the same thing. When your children are going to have a wedding, an invitation list is put together; and you invite people through that invitation, those friends, and so forth, that you want to be there. God is showing that the invitation to His Family (the invitation to live under His government) is handled in the same *individual* manner.

Let us go to a different kind of context, in the book of Acts. This was the calling and choosing of the apostle Paul, the moment of his conversion. This is said to Ananias, because Ananias had heard of Paul (knew him by reputation) and did not want to go to him because he was breathing out all these threats in his persecution against the church.

**Acts 9:15** But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.

The apostle Paul was handpicked by God—but that is no different from you. You, too, were handpicked. Paul was picked to be an apostle. You and I perform different functions within that Body from that of an apostle, but we are nonetheless *picked* to be there.

Romans 14 is another context. A little bit different, but nonetheless it has the same principle involved within it.

**Romans 14:10-12** But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written: As I live, says the LORD, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us [individually] shall give account of himself to God.

Our calling (invitation, choosing) and our judgment, all [are done] as *individuals*.

Now, one more along this line. This time all the way back to the Old Testament to the book of Ezekiel. Taking the judgment theme a little bit further. That is, taking it all the way to salvation.

**Ezekiel 14:14** "Even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job [Three of the most righteous men who have ever lived on the face of the earth.], were in it [That is, within the midst of this problem that is being described.], they would deliver only themselves by their righteousness," says the LORD GOD.

That is very clear. The point is that God is dealing with us as individuals. We are not faces lost in a crowd. What we do, good or bad, does not go unnoticed or pass by without effect. So, from the calling all the way through the process to salvation, we are being dealt with as individuals.

Now, we may not like that. We would like, in many cases, to just be a blur in the crowd—where we would not stand out. But God is the kind of Father who is aware of all of His children. And He has the capacity to keep in touch with them—every single one of them.

It is entirely possible that one could conclude from these scriptures that all this individual attention is essentially negative, because the emphasis seems to be on judgment. But there is another side to this coin; and it is as positive as can be. Turn with me back to the New Testament, to Matthew 27. At the end of the crucifixion of Christ, it says here:

**Matthew 27:51** Then, behold [He had just died], the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split.

This was *not* an insignificant event. Though in its telling it occupies only one sentence in Matthew, one in Mark, and one in Luke, it has ramifications for you and me that are awesome. What happened here, of course, was symbolic. It is **the reality** that is awesome.

In Hebrews 9:1-3, the apostle is describing the tabernacle (Not the temple, but the tabernacle.) and the furniture that is within it. He is making a point; and he felt it necessary to use the symbolic value of each one of these things to make the point.

**Hebrews 9:1** Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary.

So, the subject is the service (the ritual that went on); but the focus, though, is on the sanctuary. He points out that it was earthy. It was material, mundane—in contrast to something else.

**Hebrews 9:2** For a tabernacle was prepared: the first part, in which were the lampstand, the table, and the showbread . . .

He is saying that this tabernacle had two rooms. The first room had in it this furniture: a lampstand, a table, and the showbread.

**Hebrews 9:2-3** . . . which is called the sanctuary; and behind the second veil [The veil of which we read in Matthew 27:51—the second veil.], the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All.

So we have this holy place, and we have the Most Holy Place. That is, two rooms, separated by a curtain.

**Hebrews 9:6-7** Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priest always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance.

Now we see it drawn out a little bit further.

**Hebrews 9:8-9** The Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest [or, clear] while the first tabernacle was still standing. It was symbolic for the present time [That is, when it existed.] in which both gifts and sacrifices were offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience.

The veil obstructed entrance into the Holy of Holies (variously translated "the Most Holy Place," "the Holiest of All," "the sanctuary"); and that place symbolized the presence of God. The rending of the curtain (Matthew 27:51) signified the end—or, the destruction—of the Old Covenant way of access to God. The tabernacle, the priesthood, and the ritual taught that God was inaccessible—that He was remote.

In fact, the ritual taught that access to God was restricted to everyone except one man, once a year. Nobody else had access to God. The only one who actually had access, according to the ritual, was the high priest; and he went into the Holy of Holies with a great deal of **fear**—that one day of the year, on the day of Atonement.

Do you know WHY he feared? Do you remember what happened to Nadab and Abihu, when they presented themselves to God in a profane way? The lightning came out and struck them dead! Every high priest remembered that, after that. It is recorded in Jewish history that the high priest went into the Holy of Holies (into, symbolically, the presence of God). He very quickly dashed the blood about and just about ran out as fast as he could.

God did that on purpose—to portray *to you and me* what an **awesome blessing** it is, what an **awesome privilege** it is, that we have accorded to us. That is, that we are actually able to go into the presence of God.

Now, let us string together other scriptures, also out of the book of Hebrews.

**Hebrews 4:14-16** Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly [Confidently. It literally means, "with freedom of expression] to the throne of grace . . .

We would say, in the vernacular: **Pour it all out** before God. Feel free to do so. We have this right, this privilege, to go boldly through the curtain—to the very throne of grace.

**Hebrews 4:16** . . . that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

**Hebrews 6:19** This hope we have as an anchor of the soul [Something firmly implanted that will not move], both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil.

And we are anchored to it. That is the illustration. Using a sailor's figures of speech, it is as though there is an anchor rope that goes from each one of us, symbolically, behind the veil and into the very presence of God. There it is stuck on a Rock; and that Rock, you see, is Christ.

**Hebrews 6:20** Where the forerunner [The Greek is *prodromos*, meaning, "the scout"] . . .

Why does a scout go out ahead of the main party? A scout goes out to make sure that it is safe because he knows, absolutely, that others are to follow him. Where did He scout out (in the symbolism)? He scouted out the Holy of Holies. He is now in there, so that we can go in—because He has already scouted it out.

**Hebrews 6:20** Where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

**Hebrews 9:11-12** But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place [the Holy of Holies, the sanctuary] once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.

**Hebrews 9:24** For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us [or, rather, in our behalf].

**Hebrews 10:19-20** Therefore, brethren, having boldness [confidence] to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh.

You will remember that the veil was torn. The apostle, in writing this, is making a comparison of what it is that makes it possible for us, too, to enter. Christ's flesh was torn. You see, "through His flesh."

**Hebrews 10:21-22** And having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us summarize these verses that we just went through—at least, as they pertain to this subject [of government]. Our High Priest has already gone into **the real** (the heavenly) **tabernacle**. And *He is God*. As a result, we are invited (indeed, encouraged) to also draw near with a full and confident assurance that we are accepted directly into God's presence, too. Not only does the rending of the veil signify the way into God's presence is unobstructed to those who are covered by the blood of Christ, it also—Get this!—signifies the end of the separation between the priests and the people.

Now, if you can remember the arrangement of the service of the tabernacle—the high priest was allowed into the Holiest of All one time a year. He **only** was allowed there. The ordinary priest was permitted to go into the first room in the carrying out of his responsibilities. No other Israelite (though he had made the covenant with God) was even allowed in the tabernacle.

Do you get the picture? *We are*—by virtue of God's calling, conversion, the entering into the covenant, and the receiving of God's Spirit—*now spiritual Israelites*. But we are more than that! Again, think of what I just told you about the high priest being allowed into the Most Holy Place once a year, and about the regular priest being permitted into the holy place to carry out his responsibilities. But what is **the church**? It is a royal priesthood of believers, and it is allowed into both places!

Now think of this in its governmental effects. There is **no** religious hierarchy between God and us. Not only do we have direct access into the presence of God, but also there is no hierarchy—no priesthood that stands between you and God—because *you are the priesthood*. There is **no man** between you and God. (No John Ritenbaugh between you and God.) We can confidently approach God, secure in our liberty to do so—because of Christ's blood.

Let us put this together with the last sermon. The church is viewed as a new creation (a new humanity, if you want to put it that way) in which Jesus Christ is "the last Adam"—whose image we are all destined to bear.

In "the first Adam"—the Adam that was in the Garden—we all share his 'creature-ness.' We all sin, and we all die. In Jesus Christ. . . He, too, entered into this humanity—because He was born of a woman. So, He entered into humanity. However, He did not sin. And, as a result of that, He became the means of mankind's salvation from his bondage to sin and death.

Through the resurrection, He became a life-giving Spirit. Most of this is contained in one chapter (I Corinthians 15). Through the resurrection, "the second Adam" became a life-giving Spirit. He was the firstfruits—the firstborn from the dead. He, therefore, is the image of "the man of heaven" (or, we might call Him "the spiritual Man"). And it is **this image** that God wants everybody to bear! So, those who belong to Him (Christ) are being transformed into this image—from the glory of man, to the glory of God.

Now here comes the importance of all of those verses in the book of Hebrews: In order for us to be **transformed** from the glory of man to the glory of God, we *must* have the same kind of access to the Father as Jesus Christ did, so that we can have the same kind of **relationship**—and thus have the same kind of **submission** to the Father.

What does this mean in practical fact? It means that we are to think of Christianity not as church membership, but as an intimate fellowship with God! We are permitted into His presence through prayer and Bible study that we might draw on, absorb, and receive strength from **WHAT HE IS!** (by means of His Spirit).

This privilege brings with it responsibility—the responsibility of acting like sons of God, acting like a royal priesthood. I do not mean "acting" in the sense of being a hypocrite. I mean acting in the sense of *living a way of life*. His very purpose for allowing us into His presence is that we might be able to draw on Him—to receive strength to fulfill that purpose.

It is entirely possible that just staying within the limits of law would produce a rigid, inflexible, colorless, and austere person and society—where people rigidly keep a law, but their lives are not abundant and joyful. Remember? I said there are two reasons that government does not work on earth. The first one is this overwhelming unwillingness to live within limits. The second one is so closely tied to the first that it is impossible to separate them. The second one is the unwillingness to do acts of love.

Love begins with keeping the commandments, but it does not end there.

**Isaiah 42:21** The LORD is well pleased for His righteousness' sake. . .

The "His" there is referring to "the servant of the LORD." This whole couple of chapters concerns itself with "the servant of the LORD." And *the servant of the LORD* reached its highest fulfillment in Jesus Christ.



**Isaiah 42:21** The LORD [meaning, the Father] is well pleased for His [That is, the Servant's] righteousness' sake; [here is what the Servant will do:] He will exalt [magnify] the law and make it honorable.

That is what Jesus Christ did with His ministry. In regard to lawfulness, in regard to faithfulness, His preaching focused on magnifying the law—bringing it to its fulfillment (not "end"). That is, bringing it so that we could see every detail of it. When Jesus preached, He showed the intent (or we might say "the spirit," or we might say "the very essence," or we might say "the main part" or "the chief part") of the law of God.

There is no place that He did this in more succinct, poignant fashion that He did in the Sermon on the Mount. We are going to go back there (to Matthew 5); and we are just going to look quickly at examples of how He magnified the law. He brought it to a much fuller understanding. (This hardly needs any explanation.)

**Matthew 5:27-28** [Christ is speaking.] "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

This is a magnification by giving the law's *intent*. The intent of the law is to stop lawbreaking **in the mind** before it ever breaks out into a lust.

**Matthew 5:40-41** If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two.

His teaching is: generosity of spirit. Do not just do what is required; go above and beyond what is required! Generously sacrifice of yourself and give, even though it is unfair. Everybody seems to agree that what He was talking about here was a common practice. That is, the mail was generally carried by the army (in Roman times). The soldier would get tired of carrying the mail. So he would get some civilian and say, "Here. Carry this." And he [the civilian] would have to carry the mail, while the soldier walked along beside him—unburdened by the weight of the mail. So, Jesus said, "Go two miles." That is, go above and beyond. The point is: generosity of spirit—even in terms of sacrifice.

Let us look a little bit further.

**Matthew 5:43-44** "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.

You know how the feelings are: "I'm going to get even. I'm going to get the better of him." But Jesus said, "No. Be so generous and sacrificing that you will bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use and persecute you." Now, look at this qualification.

**Matthew 5:45** That you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for [He gives this illustration:] He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and send rain on the just and on the unjust.

We already have an example. God **generously gives** to those who hate Him. We will not go through the whole thing, but it is good to note that Jesus reaches a conclusion that is rather startling. Why should we be this way? The answer is simple: Because that is *the way God is!* It is that simple. IF we want to be a son of God, THEN we have to emulate Him.

Where, oh where (since we have this overpowering unwillingness to submit) is *the will* and *the vision* and *the purpose* to do these things going to come from? Well, it comes from being able to be in the presence of God. That is where it comes from.

Now, look at this sort of summary statement in chapter 7.

**Matthew 7:12** Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

"This is the Law and the Prophets." Let us carry this a little bit further.

**Matthew 23:23** "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law [Interesting. What are the weightier matters of the law?]: justice and mercy and faith. . . .

We might think of **justice** as being a "weightier matter of the law;" but what about **mercy**? Did you ever think of mercy as being a matter of law? Yes, it is! (By God's own accounting.) It is going above and beyond what the law may specifically state. And even **faith** is a matter of law.

**Matthew 23:23** . . . These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.

It is kind of interesting in the light of those who say that the law is done away, or that one is no longer required to obey it. That is akin to throwing out the baby with the bath water—because *love*, by the Bible's definition, *is the keeping of the law*. That is where it begins. But mere law keeping can be cold and austere.

It is when law keeping is combined with attitudes and acts of benevolence, of good will, of kindness, of generosity, of service and sacrifice—that is, acts that are NOT specifically stated in the form of commands in God's Word. Those that require more mature judgment and discernment, and "going beyond" into *the intent* of what is specifically written. This is when life begins to become abundant, attractive, fulfilling (even though service and sacrifice are frequently required).

Both aspects are needed! The one needs the guidance of law in order to make it truly right—and not just sappy, syrupy "Do-Good-ism" that ignores true righteousness, and may even make the recipient more dependent and more irresponsible than they were before. That is what welfare programs tend to do. They create a dependency without creating **responsibility**. On the other hand, the other one needs the embellishment of the intent, of the spirit, in order to make it attractive and abundant.

How far does our responsibility to God extend? (Now we are getting to the nuts and bolts of this.)  
***How far does our responsibility to obey God extend?***

There are those who tell us that we should obey church government *regardless* because it is God's government. One man said that, when God's government (and he meant "the ministry") tells you what to do, you throw your conscience out the window. (This was a fairly high ranking person.)

That argument—that one should obey church government regardless because it is God's government—has been used down through history by a wide variety of people. The central problem here is that every form of government has misused, or sometimes abused, its power and authority. The idea, the notion, that the church alone was fit to govern over men was based on the assumption that religious men were necessarily good men. Therefore, they could be trusted to handle the power and escape the taint of corruption. However, that kind of careless assumption is what led to the Catholic Church ruling Europe, and bringing upon Europe one of the darkest periods in mankind's history.

This also led to the framers of the American Constitution forming the kind of government that we have here in the United States—where there are all kinds of checks and balances to keep one part of the government from gaining control, or power, over the other one. They did not want government in the United States to fall into the same kind of trap that they were familiar with in Europe—where the church government gained power, and actually brought government that was no better (just despotic tyrants) the same as the civil governments had been.

I think that we have to begin to assume that "God's government" and "church government" are NOT necessarily synonymous. Unfortunate, but that is the way it is.

**Romans 13:1** Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.

Just because God installs, or allows, a person in office does not mean that He endorses, or approves, of that person's every act. Turn with me back to Daniel 4. This is a principle that all of us need to see and understand.

**Daniel 4:17** 'This decision is by the decree of the watchers, and the sentence by the word of the holy ones, in order that the living [you and me] may know that the Most High [God the Father] rules in the kingdom of men [and all authority derives from Him], and He gives it to whomever He wills, and sets over it the lowest [or, the basest] of men.'

**Not always** does God set the lowest or basest of men in positions of authority. Nobody is going to tell me that David was a low or a base man. Neither was Hezekiah. Neither was Josiah. Neither was Moses, or Aaron. They all made their mistakes, but they were not low or base men. Nor was Joshua or many others as well. There have been very fine Gentile rulers, too. Not everyone is low or base.

But God wants us to understand that, for whatever His purpose, there **are** going to be times when the seats of power are held by people who are base and low. And He wants you and me to understand that He does not endorse, or approve, of what they are doing, but He **is** telling you and me that He wants us to experience living under those people. So, understand that.

Now, what is our response (when something like that occurs)? Did Daniel **obey** Nebuchadnezzar? Not all the time! What did Daniel do? He obeyed a Higher Power, but he made himself subject to whatever the decree of Nebuchadnezzar was. And if it was going to take Daniel's life, he did not like that, I am sure; but Daniel submitted to it. In these cases, God shows us He intervened.

The same thing happened with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They drew a line in the sand and said (I am sure, thinking it through), "I will go this far and no further, because God comes first."

Should it make any difference whether this person is "in the church" or out? Absolutely not! It may be unthinkable to you and me that someone *in the church* might make a decree that would be against the Word of God, but it has been done—as I am going to show you.

Let us go back to the New Testament. In Acts the eleventh chapter—here is **an outstanding example!**

**Acts 11:1-4** Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, "You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!" But Peter explained . . .

And he told them about the vision that he had. Let us pick it up in verse 6.

**Acts 11:6-10** When I observed it intently and considered, I saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' [But notice what Peter said:] But I said, 'Not so, Lord! For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.' [Now look at verse 9.] But the voice answered me again from heaven [You talk about authority!], 'What God has cleansed you must not call common.' Now this was done three times, and all were drawn up again into heaven.

Peter did NOT obey that voice—even though it was coming out of the heavens. I will tell you, with you and me, that would put us into a terror, into a fright! And it is very likely that if we heard a thunderous voice like that saying to us, "Rise and do (something that would break a commandment of God)"—I dare say that most of us would be motivated to submit to it. Especially, when it seemingly did not involve one of the Ten Commandments at all. (A minor thing—clean and unclean meats.) "It's just a little thing. It's my body. It won't hurt anybody else."

But Peter said, "**No!**" Even on something like "clean and unclean." I think that was outstanding, because this was not just something that was "unclean." Peter said that it also included things that were "common." Do you know what things were common? Something that was common would be a clean piece of meat that had become defiled by coming into contact with something that was dirty. It could be something that was just dropped on the ground.

Now let us extend this same principle a little bit further. Helel was God's government on earth. Did God want the angels, who were under Helel's authority, to obey Helel [when he rebelled]? The answer to that is self-evident. Absolutely not!

"God's government" can tell you to do wrong things. Whose responsibility is it to make the decision? It is *the individual's* responsibility. It comes on **you**. It comes on **me**. We are to prove all things and to hold fast to that which is good.

Let us carry it a little bit further, because we really have not touched on the church yet, have we? In Acts 20, the apostle Paul is saying his good-byes to fellow ministers there in Asia Minor.

**Acts 20:28-29** Therefore take heed to yourselves [ministers] and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in [into the church; in amongst the ministers] among you [ministers], not sparing the flock.

Right inside the church! That is pretty clear. Let us carry this a little bit further. We might get to thinking that, "Well, he's talking there about local church elders. Men who may not have a high distinction. Not even, maybe, a church pastor. But surely it could not happen to an evangelist. Or, surely it could not happen to an apostle."

**II Corinthians 11:13-14** For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.

He called these people "apostles." That is a pretty high rank, the way you and I would look at it. To take this a little further, you can just jot down Galatians 1:6-10, where Paul said that even if an angel from heaven should tell you. He is not saying that actually occurred. He is just pointing out, to you and to me, where the responsibility lies. It behooves you and me to recognize this and to be prepared.

Understand that God holds **you** and **me** *individually* responsible. And if you and I are keeping close to God (taking advantage of the access to Him), then we can count on God's protection. We can count on having the discernment to be able to perceive that something does not smell right. It does not look right. It does not sound right. It does not seem right. Something seems off target. Things do not jive. (I do not know how many different ways that I can say this.)

Somehow or another—through the Spirit of God—God will jog our minds to make us draw back from something that might get us into trouble. It will make us wary so that we have time to think it through, to prove it, and to seek counsel.

Should there be no time, then you can be absolutely sure (because God loves you, and because you are keeping contact with Him—taking advantage of that opportunity) that He will intervene in some way to spare you. Remember that He promises not to give us a test that is too great for us.

But He wants us to understand that is the only way this can be done! We have to be dealt with *as individuals*. **The responsibility in God's government falls on the individual.** That is the way that everything is going to get straightened out. (When everybody turns, on their own, you will not have these problems in society.)

Let us carry this just a bit further.

**I Corinthians 11:17-18** Now in giving these instructions I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse. For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it.

You know that false teachers had gotten into this congregation.

**I Corinthians 11:19** For there must [I want you to notice that word. For there **must**. . .] also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you.

This may give us some indication of **why** God allows His church to be infiltrated. He wants to see how much we love Him. He wants to see how much we—as *individuals*—are thinking, discerning, taking advantage of our access to Him, studying, praying, understanding, discerning. And it will become clear, because **it will create a test that will make us choose**. (It is a hard test—I grant you that. A very difficult one!)

All of us bear this responsibility, but some bear the responsibility more than others do because God says, "To whom much is given, much is required." I feel that my responsibility is much greater than most of yours—by virtue of the position that I hold. But *you* have the responsibility as well. None of us will be able to go to God and say, "Well, the minister made me do it."

So let us close in II Corinthians 5.

**II Corinthians 5:9-11** Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are well known to God, and I also trust are well known in your consciences.

We must **answer to Christ**—not any minister, even though he may be an apostle. If one fails to follow what the church lays down in doctrine, and finds himself outside of the main body—that may produce a difficult-to-live-with circumstance. Maybe we will look at that, shortly, in next week's sermon.

But I think all of us need to strive toward the **obedience** that Peter exhibited when he refused to obey "the voice from heaven" that commanded him to break a seemingly minor point of God's law. I think that God really loved that—especially when it can be done with a graceful and respectful submission without self-righteousness or finger-pointing accusations.