

God And Government

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You probably do not realize it, but we are in the midst of a very contentious and significant presidential election. (laughter) It pits not just two ideologically opposed men against one another, but essentially, it pits one half of the nation against the other half.

We Americans are a severely divided people, and we seem to have reached the point of mutual intolerance. Some say that civil war is inevitable. Some say it has already begun. Frankly, the election of either man could spark an explosion of violence here on the home front. We just do not know. Both sides are making gestures that they do not want to accept the election if they lose. One says the voting will be fraudulent. And the other says we do not want Orange Man. What is going to happen after November 3? We do not know.

The political divide in America has to do with radically different values on each side. Its concerns are divergent economic beliefs and principles. It deals with what each side feels is the American way. What is patriotism? What is American exceptionalism?—very radical ideas on either side of those things. It centers on opposing views on Donald Trump's fitness to hold the office of president of the United States. But most of all, it deals with diverse perceptions about government—its size, its role, its power, and its foundational principles.

Government is one of the most divisive subjects within any organization. Obviously, disagreements over the forms, powers, and rights of government—not to mention who runs it—have been the seed of many wars, coups, and rebellions throughout history. But even within institutions, businesses, academies, and yes, churches, the government question is likely to spawn hard feelings and disputes and splits.

Many of us have been involved in various levels of such governmental squabbles and divisions, even within the church. It is vital for the success of an organization to get that government part right.

Consider that the government of the United States has been a significant factor in its fairly peaceful, profitable, and prosperous 244-year run with its separation of powers, and checks and balances, and its purposely slow and difficult processes and procedures to get anything changed.

The American government has not been perfect by any means, but it has weathered significant political storms. We have had wars; we have had civil war in which half a million plus of our own died; we have had slavery and emancipation; we have had depressions; we have had epidemics; and we have had assassinations and scandals—those sorts of things. But, on the other hand, it has quite peacefully held elections, and transferred power from one president to another.

For a nation of carnal human beings, I have to say that America has done a mostly satisfactory job on the government part; this, despite the fact that we all hate government one way or another. Mostly, we hate the one that has “IRS” on his name tag. But having said that about America, having done a mostly satisfactory job (regarding government), it is by no means perfect.

The United States government has gotten a lot of things wrong, and I mean *a lot* of things wrong. It has authorized many horrible things—wars; abortion; sterilizations; illicit drug testing; stealing resources from other nations; political assassinations; corruption galore; prejudice; and much more. We could go on with the sins of the United States Government.

But similar things could be said about every nation on the face of the earth, with governments as diverse as Canada, China, France, Saudi Arabia, Colombia, Nigeria, Australia, Japan, Russia, Greece, Israel, and on and on. You could name every government on the planet, and they would all be corrupt.

So even if a nation has a fairly beneficial and workable government, it still gets a lot wrong. No human government is without fault. That is, no

government controlled and operated by carnal men and women is anywhere near perfect. In fact, we could say that human governments, whatever their form, are doomed to disappoint their citizens, and often. As Winston Churchill said in 1947, “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

Now, it is a hard fact to swallow, for some of us, but this is even true of human governments set up by God.

Let us go to Hebrews 8. This speaks about the Old Covenant. Now I know the Old Covenant is not necessarily a government, but it basically sets up the agreement between Israel and God about how things would go from then on between them and their relationship. And in that document is what is said in the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me.” God placed himself at the top of that government, and it went from there through Moses.

Hebrews 8:7-10 For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, He says: "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

So God acknowledges, here, that the first covenant, that is the Old Covenant, was not perfect. It had a fault, a very glaring fault; a fault that was going to doom it from the very beginning. It did not work to produce the Israel that God desired. And where did the fault lie? With them! It was with the other party in the agreement. The fault was in the people. They could not keep the Old Covenant. That is exactly what He says. “They did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them.” That is a nice way of saying that He let them be conquered and scattered.

Ergo, the fault of human governments is in the fallible humans that run them. That is an incontrovertible truth. Anything human is going to have flaws. And the more human they are, the more flaws they have.

So today, and again on the Last Great Day, I will consider this subject of government: God's government; church government; ultimately, self-government. It is a subject that is vital to what these holy days are, and what their fulfillments will be as we understand them.

The Millennium and the time of the Great White Throne Judgment will be successful because of proper godly government. That is the only thing that will make it work. And of course, people will follow, because those people who are under that government, for the most part, will be complying and obeying that government with a whole heart.

Let us go to Revelation 20. This passage describes the fulfillment of the Feast of Tabernacles. And, as we read through it, I would like you to think about what the theme of this small passage is.

Revelation 20:4-6 And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.

Now, the central theme—the central idea—of this passage is governmental. Notice how it starts. I will just list these two things He mentions, not necessarily in order in the passage:

First, those in the first resurrection submitted to God's government as followers—as underlings—during their lives they obeyed God's Word. They learned to be governed, and to control themselves.

Second, when they were raised through the resurrection from the dead, as a reward they are given thrones; given authority to pass judgment; are made priests of God; and are made to reign for the length of the Millennium—1,000 years.

First they learned to be under the government. And when they passed that test through faithfulness, they were given the opportunity for 1,000 years to be a part of that government.

As has been asserted before, the primary theme of the Bible is government. Will we recognize God's authority? Will we recognize God's judgment? Will we submit to Him in this life?

Those are all fair questions. If we recognize His authority, if we recognize His judgment, and we submit to it, then we will be given authority to govern others in the world to come. We have to go through some pretty rigorous training in this life in order to be given the authority to do that in the next.

So here in this life, we are learning to follow Jesus Christ and understand what that is all about. Look at it from the direction of those people whom we will be governing in the Millennium; understanding where they are going to be tripped up; understanding their weaknesses and foibles; understanding their ability to be deceived, and all those other things that we go through now and have to overcome.

And so when we teach them and rule them in the world to come, we will have answers—answers gained by experience; answers gained through learning the wisdom of our God, Jesus Christ.

Jesus sums up this theme of learning to be under government in Matthew 4:10 and Luke 4:8. They are quoting Deuteronomy 6:13 in the Septuagint, he says very simply, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve.”

If you tape that to your computer monitor, or put it on your wall, or someplace where you are going to see it, that would be a wonderful reminder every day—you *shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve*.

God, then, from Jesus' words here, is always at the apex—at the pinnacle—of government, especially in our minds. It does not matter what the government is, He is always there at the top. In fact, *He sits first in every chain of command*. Do you realize that?—in every governmental structure, whether or not the people who are in and under that structure acknowledge it; no matter what nation, what person, what form of government is involved, God is still sovereign and firmly in control.

Despite what we may think, despite what we may see with our eyes, He is always on top.

Do you know Scripture says this time and time again? It is a hard concept for us to understand. I want to read four different passages in which this is stated very plainly. Let us first go to Jeremiah 27. This is in the, “bonds and yokes” thing that God made Jeremiah go through as a symbolic gesture, here. This is what God says to Israel:

Jeremiah 27:5-7 'I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are on the ground, by My great power and by My outstretched arm, and have given it to whom it seemed proper to Me. And now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, My servant; and the beasts of the field I have also given him to serve him. So all nations shall serve him and his son and his son's son, until the time of his land comes; and then many nations and great kings shall make him serve them.'

In this passage, He is saying that He was the One orchestrating everything. And He was the One that had given Judah to Nebuchadnezzar. He was the One that had set Nebuchadnezzar up over this empire. And in time He would push him out and allow other nations to rule.

Let us go to Daniel 4. This is the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, here in this chapter. We are just picking out a couple verses, because this is where Nebuchadnezzar is humbled.

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 may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, gives it to whomever He will, and sets over it the lowest of men.'

Daniel 4:34-35 And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever: For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, "What have You done?"

God is sovereign.

We have looked at it from kind of two sides here—first in terms from the side of Judah being given into Nebuchadnezzar's hand. And now here, where God is making Nebuchadnezzar face the fact that *He* ruled Nebuchadnezzar, and He could do with him whatever He will.

Let us go to Romans 13. Paul puts this very succinctly.

Romans 13:1-2 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. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.

So, it basically says here, if you go against the appointed authority, then you are actually going against God.

Now, we do not want to take that too far, because sometimes those appointed authorities tell us to do things that God says, “Don’t do,” and we have to obey God rather than man.

Let us finish out this little section here in I Timothy 6.

I Timothy 6:11-16 But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I urge you in the sight of God who gives life to all things, and before Christ Jesus who witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate, that you keep this commandment without spot, blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ's appearing, which He will manifest in His own time [Now, this is the point that I want you to get], He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen.

All of these passages essentially say the same thing: God is Supreme; God is Sovereign. It is this fact that is the foundation of *all* government—that God is at the top of the pile and always will be. And even if we think differently, that is not so.

Because He is supreme, because He is sovereign, we must submit to Him and serve Him.

As I said about Jesus Christ and God the Father being at the top of everything is the foundation of all government, this law that we must submit to Him and serve Him, is the basic law of the universe. That is the only way it can be. He rules—we submit.

We would do well to quit trying to avoid it or subvert it. Trying to live contrary to this basic law shows how perverse we are. We are trying to avoid reality. Reality is unseen. The truth gets trampled in the dirt, unfortunately, by most people. They do not see what we have had revealed to us, that God is supreme, and omnipotent, and sovereign over everything.

Now let us turn a little bit in this sermon. We are not going off on a great tangent; it is part of my line of thinking. But this point right here, is pretty much done what I wanted to say in terms of God being at the top of all things.

Now I want to consider *forms* of government for a little bit, particularly those forms of government that we find in Scripture.

If you think through what has happened, what has gone on in the pages of the Bible, think of the different men that God worked with, we have to admit that most of these forms of government did not originate with God, but with humans. In fact, many of them were just cultural practices of the time. And the patriarchs, the judges, the prophets, the king's and whatnot, just went with it as their form of government, and God worked within it. And believe it or not, even though many of these forms of government did not originate with God but with humans, God actually produced good things out of them, and was able to move His plan along within those forms of government.

I guess my goal in this part of the sermon is that I hope we will see that God does not mandate a specific form of human government. I want to emphasize the word “mandate” here. He does not say, “You shall have a hierarchical form of government.” His past example shows that He did not demand that of the people. He worked with many different forms of government. I will admit, yes, some are better than others, but we have to think this through.

Let us go to Genesis 12. We will start with Abraham. He is always a good place to start with.

Genesis 12:1 NOW the LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you."

Genesis 12:4-5 So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Then Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had

gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan. So they came to the land of Canaan.

Underneath these verses that we have just read is a form of government. When God called Abram, he was already immersed in a patriarchal form of government. That is the way things were set up at the time among certain tribes. Patriarchy, which is literally family-ruler, or father-ruler—is family government enlarged. It is the government of a clan, or a tribal government.

So you have the oldest male in the primary line as the ruler, and he passes it down to his first born son, or whomever he chooses. That is the way it works. It is not really a monarchy. It could *develop* into a monarchy. But the patriarchal form was very prevalent among those wandering tribes—the ones that moved with their caravans and such, and went about, who had no fixed place. But it was used in other places as well.

We find here that Abram was a patriarch of a clan that included his wife, his nephew, servants, and all their goods.

Let us consider this: What kind of group are we talking about here? We do find out that in Genesis 13:2 that Abram was very rich in livestock and in silver and in gold. He was no piker.

We had a professor at Ambassador College who told us that Abraham was not a shepherd. Abraham was a businessman. He was a merchant king. He was a lord of, actually, quite a large group. And he had lots of money. When he went anywhere, people noticed, not just because he brought in a lot of people, but because he was very, very rich. And if you could get some business dealings with old Abram, you might be set; if you could run guards for his caravan, or if you could do something as part of his trade routes, well you would link yourself up with a pretty wealthy guy. This clan that Abram had later expanded to include his other sons, and others who joined them.

You have the story of Rebecca being brought from Padan-haran, she brought her servants and such. We find out in chapter 14 that Abram had 318 trained servants born in his own house, trained to fight, trained to be his own army. He had a sizable war force, if you will, born in his own house. How long has

this had this house been going on that he had 318 people born into his house as servants, and he had taken the time to train them from when they were little to handle spear and sword, as well as to do other kinds of duties?

You start doing the math here; 318 men; I am sure they liked women, so they probably had a wife, or wives (you never know in that day); and then they have children; and then you have other non-fighting servants; suddenly were over 1,000, 1,500, 2,000 people that were governed by the patriarch—by Abraham. This is what Isaac inherited. This is what Jacob connived to steal from his brother, Esau.

Now, the patriarchy was not perfect. Funny, I just mentioned Esau and Jacob and their squabbles. And let us not forget Jacob's sons, and their problems. But God worked within this patriarchal system in the early days. He worked with it, about four to five generations until they went into slavery in Egypt.

That is a good example of a government that God worked with.

Let us go to Exodus 3. By this time, things have changed. Israel is a slave people, and He has to call Moses to get them out of Egypt:

Exodus 3:7-10 And the LORD said: "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites. Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."

Here, Moses is called, and is given his commission by Jesus Christ to go and get the people out of Egypt. He was to be their leader. So this is the next governmental system that He works with.

Israel's governmental form under Moses is unique. In one way he was a priest, in another way he was like a king. He was a lawgiver. He was a commander-in-chief. He was also a prophet, and a judge. And since God was Israel's true King, thus what he worked under was a theocratic monarchy. You could even say, a theocratic dictatorship—a benign dictatorship. God was at the top of that one, and Moses was the person He used on earth. Moses acted as a vizier, or prime minister, or steward of God on this earth and leading His people.

We know from Exodus 18 that Jethro, his father-in-law, came and said, “Look, you take too much on yourself. It is too hard for you to judge all these people, so set up a system of judges under you, and only the hardest cases will come to you.”

So this system seemed to work—it worked for Moses, worked for God. But this system did not pass over Jordan. It ended with Moses, because Moses is unique in Scripture. However, God, along with meek and faithful Moses, made it work throughout the wilderness. God worked through that governmental system.

Now the next one is Joshua. We will go to Joshua 1. We will read the first nine verses of that chapter. Just kind of listen to the way God approaches Joshua here. It is a little bit different than what He did with Moses.

Joshua 1:1-2 After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, it came to pass that the LORD spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying: "Moses My servant is dead. . . .

This is kind of like saying, “Okay, this is a stopping point. Things are going to be a little bit different from this point on out.”

Joshua 1:2-9 “. . . Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them—the children of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you, as I said to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the River Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your territory. No man shall be able to stand

before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."

There is a different tenor, here, in the way He speaks to Joshua than He did with Moses. And despite succeeding Moses, his job, his work if you will, was very different—quite different—from Moses.

He was not a priest. In fact, he was from the tribe of Ephraim. Nor was he a lawgiver. He had to obey the law that had been given through Moses. He was a judge, and a general of the armies of Israel. It was this latter position as general that occupied him for most of his tenure. That is why it is repeated I think three times, "Be strong and of good courage," because he was going to be leading armies up and down Israel taking the land from the Canaanites.

Now Israel was still a theocracy. God was still at the head, remember? But the human leader's role had changed. Joshua, unlike Moses, was set up as the model warrior of God. If he fulfilled his role in taking the land leading the armies, then all Israel would follow. So he was going to be leading Israel in the fear of the Lord. "Be strong and of good courage," God told him.

So, the government changed somewhat, and I think it changed to be a kind of "Theocratic Stratocracy." You probably do not know what a 'stratocracy' is. A 'stratocracy' is a military government. God was basically working through a general and his staff—the general and his captains. And it worked. That was Joshua's job; he needed the support and all that. And so that is how things worked.

Let us go to Judges 2. We will see a progression here. The judges, in a way, kind of never lost this militaristic sidelight. The judges were essentially war leaders, or rebel captains that would overthrow oppressors.

Judges 2:11-16 Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals; and they forsook the LORD God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; and they followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them, and they bowed down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger. They forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel. So He delivered them into the hands of plunderers who despoiled them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies. Wherever they went out, the hand of the LORD was against them for calamity, as the LORD had said, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were greatly distressed. Nevertheless, the LORD raised up judges who delivered them out of the hand of those who plundered them.

Judges 2:18 And when the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed them and harassed them.

So right after Joshua died, God called a series of judges. As I mentioned, their primary purpose was as deliverers—saviors. They were military leaders. And, once they had fulfilled the role of military leader, and kicked out whoever was oppressing them at the time, they became chief justices of Israel. They were the ones that filled Moses' position as the one at the top whom all the hard cases came to. That was their role. First it was a military role, and then they settled into this role of being chief justice of the nation.

As far as I know, except for Samuel, who was a prophet, none of them did much more than this. As a matter of fact, a lot of the judges were fairly local. They would be ruling essentially over just a tribe or two or five or six. There are very few the judges that actually ruled over the whole House of Israel.

It is worth noting during this period of the judges, that God also worked through a woman, Deborah, because there was no man who would or could do what she could do. She was the strongest one in the nation, so God picked her. She led the fight against Sisera, and it was another woman, Jael, who drove the spike through the captain's temple there. So the men got really weak at one point in northern Israel during this time, and God used a woman because no man would do what He needed done.

But overall, amidst all of these judges that God would call, the primary government, if you will, was anarchy—no law, no government. Every man did what was right in his own eyes. You can find that in two places, Judges 17:6, and Judges 21:25.

Now, this is not a good example during the time of the judges, but God made it work. In a small way, He moved things forward until He got to the next point, or until the people got to the next point.

So we now arrive at I Samuel 8. Israel is doing what it normally does—complaining:

I Samuel 8:4-5 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, "Look, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. . . .

They turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes, and perverted justice. So, they were not very good leaders.

I Samuel 8:5-8 . . . Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations." But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." So Samuel prayed to the LORD. And the LORD said to Samuel, "Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that

I should not reign over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt, even to this day—with which they have forsaken Me and served other gods—so they are doing to you also.

“How does it feel, Sam? I’ve been feeling this for hundreds of years with these people.” So He says now, verse 9:

I Samuel 8:9 Now therefore, heed their voice. However, you shall solemnly forewarn them, and show them the behavior of the king who will reign over them."

The rest of the chapter is this litany of things that the king was going to do—bad things—take their sons, take their daughters, take their maid servants, take their man servants, take their money, take their fields, and so forth and so on. The king was going to be a taker.

So at this point, Israel changes to a human monarchy. They are no longer a theocratic monarchy; not in form necessarily, because God says right there, that they rejected Him.

They started with Saul, and he turned out to be a (I will not say the word that is going through my head)—he was not up to it. And later, he was replaced by David and his perpetual line.

After the two nations split during Rehoboam’s reign (Jeroboam taking Israel to the north and Rehoboam staying there in Judah with the couple of tribes that he had under him), Israel went through a series of short dynasties and one-off kings who took the throne through various things like treachery, and coup, and that sort of thing.

Yet you know what? Even though Judah did maybe just a little bit better than Israel, God worked through that form of government, and through those people who are very human, very much unconverted; some of them were very evil. But God still moved things forward; God still worked through that government. It did not end well. Both of those nations were taken into captivity by Assyria, and then by Babylon. But God made it work—the things He needed to do during that time.

Now let us get to Nehemiah 5 where we have an additional form of government that God worked through.

Nehemiah 5:14 Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year until the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the governor's provisions.

I just picked this out of here because it says what form of government it is. Nehemiah was an imperial governor appointed by the Persian King Artaxerxes. He was not a king. He was a servant. He was actually one of the captive Jews, one of the people who were under the Persian thumb, although they had been allowed to go out from Babylon and such by this point.

But he had to juggle his loyalty—a very personal loyalty—to the Persian king while being faithful to God in all that he did there in Jerusalem. He had to finish the work of rebuilding the wall under the threat of attack by the local petty rulers there in the land of Israel and Judah.

Now, God actually did a very mighty work through Nehemiah, and yet another kind of governmental administration. We could also (we will not go there) consider how God used Daniel, and his three friends—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They worked in the Babylonian administration. They were imperial servants just like Nehemiah. And what a work he did with through Daniel! What a work he did through Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! It would be interesting to find out how things went after they came out of the fire.

Now, in the New Testament, things were not as cut and dried as we may think, or we have been led to think. I know I am going against the grain of a lot that we have learned in the Worldwide Church of God, but I do not think we faced it openly enough.

Perhaps the clearest passage of church government in the book is in a place that a lot of people do not go to. It is in I Peter 5. But even this is not

conclusive. It is just a suggestion, something we could see between the lines here about the way that Peter thought the church should be governed. So this organization of church government is more of a suggestion, here.

I Peter 5:1-4 The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion (or constraint) but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.

Here, Peter suggests a church organization of pastors or elders under Christ. That is what we read between the lines, here. We are all under the Chief Shepherd who is Jesus Christ.

Peter, an apostle, simply calls himself an elder, although he was an apostle—that was his job. I do not know if you noticed, but Peter's primary emphasis in these four verses is not on the organization, but on the attitude of the elders. They are to be caring shepherds. They are to be servants. They are to be willing helpers, eager workers, and especially, good examples.

Why? Because that is where God is going to judge them. He is not going to judge them on the form of government they had. He is going to judge them on how well they did their jobs, and how much they used the character of Jesus Christ in doing them.

Now there are other scriptures that people have pointed to, about the way the church should be formed. Let us go to Ephesians 4, and we will see one that is brought up often.

Now, if you have a New King James, and it has the paragraph headings, if you look up above verse seven (at least in my Bible), it says “Spiritual Gifts”—that is the subject here.

Ephesians 4:11-13 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers,

for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

A lot of people point to this passage to say that this is the organizational form of the church—apostles, prophets, evangelists, and then under that pastors and teachers. But if we read this closely, it actually says nothing about organization, and everything about God's gift to the church to help, equip, and edify it. It is talking about what God has given in terms of, as it says here, equipping the saints for service, and for edifying—building up—the body of Christ. These are tools. Apostles do a certain work. Evangelists do a certain work. Prophets do a certain work. Pastors and teachers do a certain work. That does not mean that is how they are ranked necessarily. They each have their own jobs, and God has gifted them with what they need to do for those particular jobs. So these are not ranks in a hierarchy, necessarily, but descriptions of responsibilities.

A similar list is found in I Corinthians 12:28, which we will not go to, lists them first as apostles, second as prophets, and third as evangelists. And that kind of ranks them that way—first, second, and third. But again, if you look, you will see that Paul is not interested in any kind of hierarchy there, but in the priority of the gifts. He is saying the gifts that are given to apostle are first in rank because they are given a very broad and powerful set of gifts. Prophets are given a secondary set of gifts that are also very good, but not as much as an apostle's. Then the other ones that come under that, are given lesser gifts, but their gifts are put in a package that will help them do whatever their work is for the church as the servants of God. So the gifts are first, second, and third, in terms of their value to the church.

Now, we do think—having a little bit of common sense here—because the apostles have the greatest gifts that they stand at the top under Christ. And we know that because the original apostles—the Twelve—are going to be each over a tribe of Israel, as far as we understand how things go. So they are the top leaders among human beings under Christ in the church; they are apostles, and their Master is the Chief of those apostles. The rest of the jobs that are mentioned—prophet, evangelist, pastor, teacher—can fall under them in this order.

The Worldwide Church of God structure for many decades followed this particular order of things. I am not saying it is wrong. I am just saying when we look into it, and we say, “Hmm! These are the ranks of officers within the church,” apostle on the top, then prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers; we split up preaching elders and local elders; then the poor deacons—they come right there at the end. They have to do all the physical things, but it works. It is been used in the other churches of God.

You know, it is a fine organization. All I am saying is God is not as much interested in the organizational chart as He is in the fact that these people do their jobs as He wants them to do it. They could be anywhere in this hierarchical rank and do a good job. But we read structure into this passage if we take it to mandate a hierarchy. It does not do so. Like I said, it can work. Do you know why it will work? It will work if the man at the top is true and faithful.

A hierarchy is not bad as a form of government. Remember, we started this talking about how it is the *human* in us that makes it fail. The more like Christ the man at the top is, the better that church is going to function.

If the person at the top is not Christ-like, you get the Catholic Church, or you get Worldwide after Herbert Armstrong died, or something like them; it will fall to pieces. It will not be the organization it once was.

Let us go to I Corinthians 12. Notice here, if you have the paragraph headings, you will see that this one is called, “Spiritual Gifts: Unity in Diversity.” That is what it says in my New King James. Paul writes here:

I Corinthians 12:4-8 There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries [services], but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit.

Etcetera, etcetera. It goes through several other gifts that are given.

Here is the same apostle that we saw in Ephesians 4:11, and he is speaking about the same subject. He is speaking about gifts given through the Holy Spirit.

I came here because in the King James Version, in verse 5, the word “ministries—there are differences of ministries but the same Lord,” is “*administrations*—there are differences of administrations,” and it is possible that this word refers to ways to organize a ministry or service of the church. There are different ways that you can get a work done.

The [Greek] word is “diakonion,” which is very close to the word “deacon,” which means “the work of servants.” So let us plug that in there: “There are differences of the work of servants.” Diakonion means the work of those who wait at table; the work of waiters; the work of those who serve a table. And that is what the original deacons did. They were serving food to the people.

Paul may be saying, here in verse 5, that there are different ways of doing a work. There are different ways of organizing the activities of the church. But the key is: It is the same Lord who heads, drives, and inspires them all. If you have got Christ at the head of a work, and you organize it in one way or another, He is going to use that to get the work done.

Now we should be using wisdom in how we decide to organize things. Perhaps the hierarchal way will work best. Perhaps a collegial way will work a little bit better, or perhaps splitting things up into various groups that all contribute their part to the whole—however you want to do it. But if it gets the work done, and it is done in a proper way, and Christ is at the head, and everybody is subject to Him, and doing what is right and good toward one another, that is fine. We need not quibble. It is Christ who is important. It is our submission to Christ that is important.

Let us go to Colossians 1, where this point is driven home. This is about the pre-eminence of Christ, as the heading proclaims on top of verse nine.

Colossians 1:13 He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love.

He is telling us that we have been especially called out, and we have been delivered through the redemption that we have been given from the power of darkness, that is Satan and all that he is doing. And already, we are considered part of that Kingdom in a spiritual sense. It has not been completely fulfilled yet, but God has already changed our designation from part of this world and carnal, to spiritually and part of the Kingdom of God.

So we are in this new position and in this new position, we have redemption through Him through His blood, the forgiveness of sense. Verse 15: Now it gets personal about Christ again.

Colossians 1:15-18 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.

This is the most important factor of all to us: Christ is first in everything with us, and that is what is most important. If we acknowledge and submit to Christ as Head of the church, the organizational structure that is used to do the church's business is not terribly critical. What is important is that we who are involved submit to one another, not try to accrue power to ourselves, and work in love for the benefit of all. That is hard to do.

Human beings tend to fail. But we first have to get this idea in mind that Christ is the Head. The only way this or any government is going to work is if we submit to Him.

Granted, God does tend to work in a top down manner through one man whom He has called to do a work. That seems to be the way that works the best. And I have no problem with that. I have lived with that my whole life, and it has done me no harm. I gladly followed Mr. Armstrong, and then when we split, I gladly followed my dad. That works.

But, whether that person is supported by a board of directors, or a council of elders, or a board of deacons, or an assembly of all members, or members' representatives, or some other governmental organizational form, it is a matter of wisdom. It also is applied biblical principles and, frankly, time and place come as factors.

Could you imagine in these days how difficult it would be to live under a strict Worldwide Church of God hierarchy in which we demand our personal freedoms? That does not seem to work as well as it did 50 or 60 years ago. We are just a different people. We do not like to be told what to do. It is much better if we have the same mind and want to do the same things, rather than to be told from the top down that you are not doing this right, or not doing that right.

Maybe, as time goes on toward the end that is going to be needed again. But we have a different mind these days, a different way of looking at things, and it just does not work as well as it did a half a century ago.

But what matters—what really matters—is that we who are involved in church government and organization are faithful and true to Christ. That is the bottom line.

I would like to conclude in Psalm 99. I am going to read the whole chapter. We sang this last night as we closed services. This is page number 75 in our hymnal, “Holy Mighty Majesty.” And just listen to this psalm extolling Christ for His place at the top of our government.

By the way, I should mention before we get too far into this that this is a millennial song. Obviously, when it says, “The Lord reigns,” that is what it is looking forward to. And so we will look forward to the Millennium and the presence of Christ among the people of that time.

Psalm 99:1-9 The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble! He dwells between the cherubim; let the earth be moved! The LORD is great in Zion, and He is high above all the peoples. Let them praise Your great and awesome name—He is holy. The King's strength also loves justice; You have established equity; You have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. Exalt the LORD our God, and

worship at His footstool—He is holy. Moses and Aaron were among His priests, and Samuel was among those who called upon His name; they called upon the LORD, and He answered them. He spoke to them in the cloudy pillar; they kept His testimonies and the ordinance He gave them. You answered them, O LORD our God; You were to them God-Who-Forgives, though You took vengeance on their deeds. Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at His holy hill; for the LORD our God is holy.

He is altogether “other.”

If we have this attitude now—the attitude of Moses and Aaron and Samuel—if we have the attitude that Christ reigns in the church, that He is over all the people, that He is holy and just and righteous, and that we keep His commandments—in those things we have the necessary ingredients to live faithfully, peacefully, and joyfully under God's governance.