

GOD'S STATE¹

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The State is related directly and in the most specific manner to the Ten Commandments. The State has no right or authority to encroach upon the liberties of the individual which God guarantees under His law. The State, in other words, must respect and honor the law of God as it concerns the individual, and only in honoring and maintaining this law can it serve its true function and be truly free. In doing this there are certain things the State must do and certain things it must not do. In both of these spheres, one of action, the other of inaction, the State becomes an agent for liberty. In this task it receives its authority and instruction from the Author of liberty. Just as God made the creation for Himself, and created man in His own image, so He has insisted in His Word that the State serve the ends of God and be a champion of freedom for man. When men see this, they want this kind of State; when the State sees it, it will labor only for free men.

Let us ask ourselves first, What are some of the laws that the State, as we speak of it in the United States of America, has enacted? Are not these laws taken from, and based upon, the moral law, the Ten Commandments? We have laws to protect life. Murder is an offense, according the law of the land. When it is committed, men are tried and condemned. All the various infractions of this law are, in one form or another, transgressions of the command, "Thou shalt not kill." Thus in a very clear sense the laws of society are based upon the law of God. God would have it so. We likewise have laws against impurity and indecency. Adultery is a crime against the State; fornication likewise. These and similar offenses are transgressions of the command, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Again, the law of God as revealed in Scripture is being recognized in the State.

Then we have laws, a multiplicity of them, dealing with property, the property rights of individuals and corporations. No one will deny that these are based upon the command of God's law, "Thou shalt not steal." Every man must recognize the property rights of his neighbor as well as his own.

There are also statutes dealing with slander, libel, and perjury. All of these are based upon the commands of the moral law that we should not bear false witness against our neighbor.

We practice monogamy. Our laws are against polygamy and bigamy. Our statutes regulating marriage and providing for divorce are based upon the requirement of God's commandment that a man have only one wife. The State recognizes the necessity for these demands, and endeavors to maintain them for its own security and prosperity.

¹ "God's State" is Chapter 7 of *Author of Liberty* (2nd ed.; Collingswood, N.J.: 20th Century Reformation Hour, 1963). The first edition was published in 1946, just after the end of World War II; the text quoted here is identical to that in the original edition. Portions of the chapter have been omitted in this reprinting.

The family, too, is protected. The right of a man to teach and train his own child is guaranteed by the laws of the land. And these statutes relate to the fifth commandment.

These basic fundamental laws, and many, many others, of our society are directly related to God's law, and they are, therefore, directly related to freedom. This brief summary illustrates what we mean by the common expression, "Our society is built on the Ten Commandments." We should note, however, that the laws of the State deal with the outward acts of the relations of man to man in the State. The State cannot deal with the inward thoughts of men. Thus the command, "Thou shalt not covet," dealing primarily with the heart, the State cannot enforce or minister. The State must desist from action in this sphere in order to ensure freedom of thought and freedom of the individual to honor that commandment. Likewise, the commandments that relate to the inner and direct relation of men to God, the State must leave to God and the individual. The State must desist from action in this sphere in order to honor the commands dealing with the worship and service of God. Thus the State is limited. It cannot go into the heart of man—God alone can do that—and it cannot attempt to legislate God for the individual. God alone must guide and control there.

For the State to attempt to enter these spheres is to destroy freedom for the individual. When the State attempts to legislate in the matter of man's heart and thought, it can do so, only by limiting man's speech and controlling what he hears and sees—thus free speech, free press, free radio, and all related freedoms go out the window. God has kept the heart of man for Himself, not for the State. When the State attempts to legislate in the matter of a man's relation to God, it can do so, or attempt to do so, only by circumscribing man's freedom in matters of religion. On both of these matters, the framers of the United States Constitution absolutely limited the State and protected the freedom of man as the Ten Commandments require. The only reason the State can have for regulating the relation of man to man is the same reason it has for refusing to regulate in the matters of heart, thought, and religion—and that is that men may be free, each man separately, individually. Thus, by refusing to act, the State protects liberty just as when, by law, the State keeps one man from destroying the life, property, and liberty of another.

God is the One who made the laws for the liberty of His creatures, and the State must bow before them. If it does, we shall have freedom; but if it does not, we shall have slavery, in one form or another, and in varying degrees, depending upon the degree of the departure from the law. This, of course, puts limitations upon the State of the most stringent and binding kind. In administering the affairs of men, the State must be guided by the laws that God has made for man. Thus the State literally becomes a servant of God, and this is exactly what is taught in the Bible. The concept of the State, which is presented there, sets forth the idea of liberty and guarantees us freedom. The concept of the State, in other words, should be in complete harmony with the concept of freedom. The law of God, which protects and exalts the individual, prohibits the State from tampering with that individual in the spheres where God has so clearly protected him. This is only another way of expressing our premise that the State must be the servant of man and not the ruler of man. The Bible clearly teaches that there must be a society for the preservation of law and order in which man is to live. Law and order are for the purpose of preserving life and liberty.

Back in the days of Noah, God declared, “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed” (Gen 9:6). The right of the State, therefore, to punish offenders and destroyers of free society was divinely decreed. Likewise, Jesus Christ said, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matt 22:21). “Caesar” has certain God-given powers, and in the exercise of these he must render an account to God. Thus the State is bound just as much by God in its responsibility to Him as the individual is bound. Representatives, Senators, governors, judges, the President—all public officials—should know this and acknowledge it. This is all involved when the oath of office is taken with the hand on the Bible. If the State will recognize its place under God, it will have the blessing and favor of the Almighty. If it does not, God’s favor will be taken away, and there will be disaster and tyranny. One of the finest expositions of this doctrine, as taught in the Bible, is found in the thirteenth chapter of Romans.

The New Testament with its teaching of the separation of Church and State also gives us a description of the place and power of the State. This is exceedingly important today, for it was on the foundation of this truth that our American concept of the State and of freedom was erected by our forefathers.

The Apostle Paul in the Epistle to the Romans says, “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” (ch. 13:1). He was speaking about the State. The State has no power except what is given to it by God, it being, therefore, responsible to God, as we have just noted. The power, given by God, the State exercises by His permission. “The powers that be are ordained of God.” God in His providence has brought into being each State in order that He might use it; and governments, if they would please Him and serve His purposes, must operate under His law. Paul is telling Christians that they should submit to the power of the government, and he means lawful government. “Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation (judgment). For rulers,” he declares, “are not a terror to good works, but to the evil.” Now we are approaching the heart of the issue. A distinction is being made between good and evil. “Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: for he is the minister of God to thee for good.” Here we have reached the dividing line between freedom under democracy and tyranny under communism, socialism, and other totalitarian systems.

What is the standard of good? That is the sixty-four dollar question! Here is where the conflict centers in the U.S.A.—in the battle between freedom and the left-wing element, whose ideology would take it from us. “Good,” in a free society, is one thing, while “good,” in a controlled economy—socialist and communist State—is the opposite.

If the State is to be the “minister of God to thee for good,” is the State to determine that standard, or is God to determine it? The answer is in the phrase “the minister *of* God.” It is the task of the State to minister as God would have it minister. That means that the standard of good, in the judgment of the State, must be what God has ordained. This immediately brings us back face to face with all the Ten Commandments. We cannot get away from them, neither can we let our State get away from them, so long as we recognize God’s sovereignty over man. This is the reason the State has written into its laws protection for property, life, limb, and truth.

When we observe these commandments and do that which is good, we have no need to be afraid. In fact, we receive praise, as Paul says, of the same. When, on the other hand, we steal, rob, kill, deceive, lie, bear false witness, and do other evil things, then, of course, it is the task of the State to be the minister of God. And so Paul goes on, “But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil” (v. 4). The State is here given the power to use the sword, on the authority of God. This, of course, means police power, and it also involves the whole concept of the nation’s going to war. So it is that we teach that on just and necessary occasions the Lord’s people may take part in such conflicts. In this the “sword” must be used for “good.”

In ministering this standard of good, what does the State accomplish? The answer is, Liberty. The greatest good the State can possibly furnish its citizens is freedom. This should be repeated again and again. If the standard of good is God’s law, and this law spells freedom under law for man, the State is the provider, the guardian, and the protector of man’s freedom. The supreme good God wants the State to give man is the liberty that God’s law offers. The State cannot create life, or give eternal life, but it can guarantee freedom for man to live and serve God. This is its supreme function.

When we say, “The ‘sword’ must be used for ‘good,’” we express in another way the purpose for which we fought World War II. We fought for freedom. The one service, the true function of the State, is not to provide food, clothing, and shelter for its servants, but to provide freedom for its citizens to rule. That our founding fathers placed liberty above life itself, and thus confirmed this teaching of Scripture, is evidenced also by their popular acceptance of the beloved American text, “Give me liberty, or give me death!” The greatest blessing and good in this whole notion of liberty is seen when we observe that Paul’s statement indicates good for the individual. He says, “To *thee* for good.” This is singular; the one must be protected against the many. The one must have his freedom with or without the many. It is not a case of the greatest good for the greatest number, as we so frequently hear today—such is a false, totalitarian slogan—but it is the greatest good for the one—each one—and this will therefore mean for all. This is liberty. Liberty is indivisible. To divide it is to destroy it; to add to it is to kill it.

It is here also that we come into conflict with the whole concept of the State as involved in communism, fascism, and other totalitarian systems. In communism and its various sisters, the State determines that which is good. The State thus makes “the standard of good” by which it is to exercise its police power. The communist State ignores, in the social relations of men, all that God has taught concerning the rights of property. It destroys these rights, gives us a community of property, or communism, and turns away from God’s law to enforce its own self-made standards. The State, instead of being the minister of God, becomes a minister of itself. Instead of being a minister of God for good, it becomes a minister of itself for its own idea—evil. Of course, its own idea it calls good. And, in order to establish the “good,” it must control the thought of men so as to receive an apparent voluntary submission, and in so doing, as in Russia,² the civil liberty demanded by God’s law vanishes.

² Russia in this article refers to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which Stalin was ruling at the time.

The good in a free society is liberty; the good in the communist or collectivist society is so-called security. The good in a free society produces free men before God; the good in the communistic society produces slaves under the State. It is in the conflict between freedom and security that these two systems clash today on many battlefronts, and in varying degrees. To every God-fearing man and State the greatest security is liberty itself, and to those who forget God the greatest freedom is security itself. How clearly it all stands out! Both sides use the same two words, “liberty” and “security,” but they mean the exact opposite in their use of them. If the State is going to provide food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and charity for the people, and thus control or plan their economic life, it must control the people to these ends. To control man’s economy, man’s life must be controlled; and to control man’s life, his thought must be controlled—and this is tyranny. This is one reason there is no essential difference between the principles of socialism and communism.

It is exceedingly difficult for us to see how—in fact, we cannot see it—under such teaching as the Bible so clearly gives, a communistic setup could even be considered a “minister of God.” It is a wicked, sinful system. Any State that attempts to control man’s thought, and that makes itself a god-State is wicked and sinful. So complete is this contrast and so real the conflict between the ideas of freedom and communism that the communistic State calls the free State sinful and wicked, and in maintaining what it calls good—its slavery—it is thoroughgoing in the destruction of all freedom. It is the battle between God and anti-God, between God and the god-State. The god-State becomes not the “minister of God” but the defier, the usurper of God.

The summary of the teaching of Scripture with regard to the power of the State is given, in one of its finest expressions, in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

God, the Supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates to be under him over the people, for his own glory and the public good; and, to this end, hath armed them with the power of the sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evil doers.³

The historic Christian church has been the custodian of this glorious doctrine of the power and limitation of the State. The expression, “the public good,” is in complete harmony with the encouragement of them that are good and for the punishment of evildoers. The spheres of “general welfare” and public good are predicated upon the right of property and freedom of men, and since these are essential to a free society’s existence, therefore, when the State takes property for the “general welfare” the individual is fully compensated.

The whole sphere of “general welfare”—public good—a large field of activity for the State, is limited by the demands of God’s law for the freedom of the individual. In this field the State is always the servant of the individual, protecting and providing for his freedom and such common interests which promote the general welfare consonant with true freedom.

³ WCF 23:1.

Today we are being told that the public good involves the destruction of our property system, the private enterprise way of doing things, and the substituting of the communal or collectivistic social structure.

All of this applies most directly to the situation we are facing at present in America. In fact, unless these truths are recognized, America is headed for a State which will not be the “minister of God” but will take on the nature of the Russian way of life. America’s mightiest hour of decision has been reached. The transition from one concept to another is just upon us. Shall we stand by the Author of liberty or shall we leave Him? That is the one question involved.

If it is the task of the State to administer good “to thee,” and maintain freedom, then the State itself must stay out of the sphere of the individual. It must not enter and become a party to the free competitive struggle of free men. It must stay out of business, completely out of business. It must protect the individual in this sphere of his activity. It must not, therefore, compete with him and thus hinder or defeat him. Anything, therefore, which the State does to destroy man’s freedom the State must turn away from. Thus the State, instead of encouraging its own strength, or bureaucratic development and control, must despise such thoughts and turn from them. A bureaucratic and cumbersome State cannot help but jeopardize the freedom of its citizens. The State should keep taxes from destroying the people and their property. The way to do this is for the State to refuse to enter into activities and undertake responsibilities that would involve this. It is just here that the State, in perilous fashion, is encroaching on the rights of free men today. If this continues, freedom will be destroyed by financial and economic restraint. A sound financial government, not spending more than it receives, is an asset to freedom. The present situation in America, with our overwhelming debt and increased bureaucracy, is a menace on the part of the government to every free citizen. For the same reason, the government should not arbitrarily alter or change the true value of property, savings, and incomes. It should guard and protect these evidences of wealth acquired fairly before the law.