

DEVOTIONS 12/08/2009

Romans 13:1-7

I want to give special attention to the design, structure, and role of the state, its place in God's plan for human society, and the rightful extent and limits of its power. The State has the capacity to exert a tremendous power for good in the affairs of mankind as long as it operates within its proper boundaries; but also has the potential to become the most horrendously pathological and abusive of all the social spheres if not kept in check. Older ideas about the relationship between the state and the ethical realms can be found in Webster's 1828 Dictionary. Law, politics, and the state are among other things concerned with the preservation and improvement of a people's morals. Though few today would be inclined to accept this definition, a moment's reflection is sufficient to demonstrate how important it really is. God's perspective on the state is that it is strictly subordinate to His sovereign dominion and control. Just as the Son is subject to the father, the wife to the husband, and the elders of the church to the headship of Christ, so the authority of the state, within the economy of divine design for the political sphere, is subject to and dependent upon the authority of God Himself. Governors and magistrates hold their power purely as delegates and representatives of the King of all Kings. They are appointed and armed with the sword in order that they might 1) punish evil and 2) condone good. Those who forget these principles and become puffed up with a sense of their own importance are like Ahab (1 Kings 21), Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:20-30), Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26), and Herod (Acts 12:21-23), liable to swift and severe judgment. This is worthy of special attention; for, as the Bible and history demonstrate, when human rulers overstep their bounds, deny the sovereignty of the various social spheres, and seek to establish state control over every other area of human life, tyranny, oppression, and violence are sure to follow. The godless expansion of the power of the state has reared its ugly head many times in the past, most notably in the 20th century regimes of rulers like Stalin, Lenin, Hitler, Mao, and Pol Pot. Without God, truth, or any higher moral standard, people are increasingly looking to the state as savior and the supplier of every human need. What is the proper form for this agency that is divinely appointed and commissioned to administer justice, punish evil, and encourage goodness among its citizens? The American Experiment has the potential to unusually conduce to a deeper understanding of God's design for the state precisely because it is unique in the history of the world. Here on these shores, and here alone, people with a strong Christian worldview have been afforded an unparalleled opportunity to create from scratch what they considered an ideal system of government. We need to understand the biblical character of that worldview. The New England Primer, The second bestselling book (after the Bible) of the colonial era, provides an intriguing window into the attitudes of early Americans. In particular, it reveals an outlook and a way of life powerfully shaped by the teaching of Scripture. The pervasiveness of this outlook is

further demonstrated in statements made by America's early political leaders, legal and social architects, and educational pioneers -people like Benjamin Rush, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Adams, Charles Carroll, Noah Webster, and the founders of Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia Universities. In spite of the fact that not all of them were practicing Christians, these luminaries agreed with President John Adams that the success of America's republican form of government would prove directly dependent upon the virtue and morality of her people, and that virtue and morality are necessarily founded upon religion - by which all meant the Christian religion. All of these early thinkers were convinced that the state must be held accountable to the authority of a higher ethical and spiritual standard - the "Natural Law" or the "Law of Nature's God" - if the human rights abuses they had observed in Europe and throughout history were to be hopefully avoided on this continent. America is turning away from these principles. One clear element came as Darwinian evolutionary theory made its influence felt in the field of law. In 1869, Harvard Law School Dean Christopher Langdell advanced the view that law is not based upon the transcendent standard of "Nature's God," but is rather a fluid mutating body of "doctrine," a set of purely human ideas that inevitably change "by slow degrees." In other words law and ethics, like biological species, are continually "evolving." Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes expanded on this theme by declaring that the law is "simply an embodiment of the ends and purposes of a society at a given point in its history," thus effectively granting to the state the power to establish societies ethical norms.

Today, America has largely forgotten God and denied the validity of her biblically based Christian roots. As a result, we see the power of the state expanding in our time.