

WHO NEEDS GOVERNMENT?

by Ray C. Stedman

The ninth chapter of Genesis records one of the major covenants of the Bible, a covenant God made with Noah immediately following the Flood, but beyond Noah, with all humanity. This covenant is the basis for all human government today. Therefore, it is very necessary that we clearly understand what are the provisions of God's ordering of human life and of human government, as revealed in this passage. The provisions of the covenant God made with Noah are intended to govern life in the world following the Flood. As the Apostle Peter makes clear in the New Testament, we live in that same world. It continues until the great day when fire judges the present world.

These biblical covenants are not agreements with God arrived at a bargaining table. God is never forced to come to terms with the rebellion of man. He is always in control of history; always has been, and always will be. Man is never a threat to the government of God. We must learn to understand that or we will never have any comprehension of the course of history. Therefore, these covenants must never be thought of as bargains that man makes with God. These are, rather, rules of the game, under which all humanity must live. We do not have any options. It is God who determines them, and man obeys them -- whether he likes it or not. It is impossible to break the laws of God; you can only illustrate them. If you jump from a 30-story building you will not break the law of gravity; you will but illustrate it. (That is what's called jumping to a conclusion!) It is important for us to bear this in mind as we discuss the covenants with mankind made in the Old Testament.

Now here the covenant is not only made with Noah, but, as Verse 17 of Chapter 9 indicates, it is made with "all flesh that is upon the earth." Therefore, it is a covenant that governs human life, wherever and whenever it is found. We shall go through this covenant together, and, as you follow in the Scripture, you will see that what we are discussing is reflected there. Let us look at the eight specific provisions which God put into force with the whole of the earth at the time following the Flood. These are specific things which God desires to take place, and which are taking place, in human history. They have been in effect since that day and no man can evade them.

This covenant actually begins in Chapter 6, where we have the first mention of it in Verse 18. The first provision of the covenant is God's intent to preserve mankind, through Noah. This has already been fulfilled, as we have seen:

"But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you." {Gen 6:18 RSV}

Thus mankind was preserved through the Flood. That is the first thing in the agreement God made with Noah.

The second feature is found in the closing verses of Chapter 8, which we have also looked at briefly. This second provision establishes the dependability of nature:

And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." {Gen 8:21-22 RSV}

Today we look back upon thousands of years of testimony to the faithfulness of that promise. God has made nature utterly dependable. This predictability is the basis of all modern science and investigation. God has created a nature that is dependable and upon which men can rely. The only mistake that scientists make is that they rule out the possibility of any divine intervention in it, and that, the Bible makes clear, is always God's reserved right. He can interfere in his own nature anytime he chooses, and has done so in the past.

Also in this verse we learn the fundamental reason why God makes covenants with men. In this first of the biblical covenants we learn the reason for them all. It is given in Verse 21: "Because," God says, "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." That is the fundamental truth which God is forever seeking to impress upon men. Man, who was made in the image of God and to share the glory of God, has become enslaved and distorted and twisted by the invasion of an evil principle which enslaves the mind, will, and emotions of men. Therefore, fallen man is a victim of evil imaginations from his youth on. That is the most basic and fundamental fact that the Bible declares, but, also, the basis for all the wonderful story of God's love and redemption. If this declaration is not true, then the story of Jesus Christ is not true, and the need for God's redeeming grace is denied.

Therefore, God labors to impress this fact upon men. It is the fundamental fact we must learn. In order to teach it, God established human life in such a way as to make men face up to this overwhelming fact. It is the one fact above all others which man most strongly resists. He does not like to admit it. Read the analyses of the world's thinkers, and everywhere you see how they cling to the big lie that man, at heart, is decent and good and loving. Thus, every panacea man proposes is unworkable to start with because it is based on a false conception of humanity. You can see this in the letters to the editor column in any newspaper. There proposals are made for the solutions of the problems of mankind and invariably they are based upon the idea that man is basically good; just give him a chance and all that is within will work out to the benefit of all. The difficulty of changing man's mind on this is reflected by these words of Philip Mauro, a very astute Christian lawyer:

Among the strong delusions of these times there is none stronger than that Man's Day is a day of glorious achievement, successive triumphs, and continuous progress, and that by the forces operating in it, mankind is eventually to be brought to a condition of universal blessedness and contentment. The writer knows full well that those who are under the influence of this delusion cannot be freed from it by arguments, however cogent, or by statistics showing the appalling increase of crime, accidents, suicides, and insanity, or by the open and flagrant manifestations of corruption, lawlessness, and profligacy. To all these appeals they resolutely close their eyes and ears, not willing to recognize the real drift and the certain end of what is called civilization.

That is well put. In order to impress this truth upon the reluctant heart of man: God orders human life in such a way that we cannot escape exposure to this fundamental revelation of the heart of fallen man, "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." Every provision of this covenant made with Noah, and the whole human race, is designed to drive him to the love and grace of God. Only God can save man. That is the whole point of history. God begins by making nature stable and dependable, so that man cannot blame his evil on the capriciousness of nature. We will note, as we go through, how each feature of the covenant stresses and underscores this fact of human evil.

The third provision, found in Chapter 9, Verses 1 and 2, is to disclose man's rule over the animal world through fear:

And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered." {Gen 9:1-2 RSV}

Why do animals fear man? Oh, I know this fear can be overcome by patient training, but it is only by such patient training that it is eliminated. There is an instinctive dread and fear of man in the animal creation, and there are some animals which man has never been able to tame. Why? Well, it is all designed to teach us something. If we would only look thoughtfully at nature around us, we would learn some great lessons. God is thus seeking to impress upon us that man is not what he once was -- lord of creation, made to have the animal world in loving, obedient subjection to him. But now he finds the animals fearing him, hiding from him, and running from him. It is the way God has of impressing upon us how the image of God in man is twisted and distorted, and love has been replaced by fear.

Now the fourth provision of the covenant is to provide a life that comes from death:

"Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything." {Gen 9:3 RSV}

Animal life is now made the proper food of man. It is all designed so that every meal should remind us that life is made possible only by the death of another creature. We are alive only because other creatures have died on our behalf, to sustain our life. If not animals then, at least, plants. We do not live in and of ourselves, we live by virtue of feeding upon other life. Now this seeks to impress upon us a fundamental rule of life, that we are not dependent creatures, going our own way, master of our own fate. We are the most dependent of creatures. We have no life force of our own, it is all borrowed. That is why Jesus said, in fulfillment of the truth toward which all this points, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. But whosoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life," {cf, John 6:53-54}. He did not mean that literally, but symbolically, spiritually. We are to feed on him, and draw from him all that we need. He is designed for life, and without Jesus Christ we can never fulfill the humanity that throbs in each one's being.

The fifth provision of this covenant teaches the sacredness of human life:

"Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning; of every beast I will require it and of man; of every man's brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image." {Gen 9:4-6 RSV}

There is tremendous significance in this passage. Here we are told that man may eat the flesh of animals, but not the blood. Why? Because, says God, the life is in the blood, and life is God's property. It is never man's property. Man does not impart life; he does not originate it and it does not belong to him. Therefore, he has no right to take life. That is what this teaches. Life is God's property. Even in the proper taking of animal life (which is permitted man), he still must recognize the sovereignty and authority of God over life. Therefore, says God, do not eat the blood, because the blood is the life of the animal.

Man is not an absolute monarch, as he so fondly imagines, but he must live his life under God, in relationship to God. There are things which God says are off limits for him. This is particularly true of the life of man. The text goes on to tell us, "For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning." The life of man is peculiarly sacred to God; only God has the right to take it. If anyone else violates this, God says he will require a reckoning, and it is a terrible price that God extracts. We will see what it is in a few moments. It is always paid. There is never escape from this. God says, "I will surely require a reckoning."

Now, it is not merely retribution; it is not the taking of vengeance upon another for the murder of a man. Some have read the Scripture as though it justified blood vengeance, and there have erupted terrible feuds that have run on for centuries in which one murder is avenged by another, and that by still another, until whole families are ravaged. But God, all through the Scriptures, reserves vengeance unto himself. Remember how Paul puts it. He quotes the Old Testament, "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord, I will repay," {cf, Rom 12:19b, Deut 32:35}. You have no right to take vengeance into your own hands, says God. It is my task. You don't know what will happen and you can't control the evil effects. Leave it up to me, he says: "Vengeance is mine. I will repay."

But I do think there is justification for taking this verse as a basis for capital punishment. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed." This is the instruction God gives to government for the taking of life under certain conditions. As the Apostle Paul makes clear, government acts as the instrument of God. It is the agent of God. As we read in Romans 13, government is the servant of God in this sense, {cf, Rom 13:4a} and it "does not bear the sword in vain," {Rom 13:4b RSV}. It is thus God who takes human life, when it is done through proper governmental channels, and therefore it is not murder, as many are calling it today.

Furthermore, it is clear from this passage that capital punishment is not necessarily intended to be a deterrent to crime. There is much we ought to learn from this by studying it carefully through. I am sure that capital punishment is a deterrent to crime, despite many of the articles which appear which attempt to prove the reverse, but it is not intended to be that alone. If so, why would God require, as this passage makes clear, the death of an animal who killed a man? Later on, under the Law, if an animal accidentally or deliberately killed a man, the animal's life was forfeit. God required that the animal be slain, as he says also here, "Of every beast I

will require it." What is the point of that? Surely not to deter crime among the animals. No, the purpose for this taking of life as an instrument of God's justice is to teach us something. It is to teach us that human life is off limits. Only God has the right to take it. It is to be taken only under the conditions which he prescribes. If even an animal touches a man he must be slain, to impress upon us that God highly values human life. Could anything be clearer than this?

We can hear in this the echoes of God's words to Cain after the murder of his brother, Abel, "The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground,." {Gen 4:10b RSV}. Murder makes a claim upon God, upon his justice and his power. Injustice, violence, and bloodshed all cry out to the justice of God for correction, and God cannot ignore it. Remember that God set a mark on Cain to teach men that they must not take vengeance into their own hands, that even an outright, acknowledged murderer is not to be prey to any other human being who desires vengeance. But man, before the Flood, in his evil, twisted that restriction to his own advantage, and used it to justify violence (as you see in the case of Lamech, in chapter 4{:23-24}). The result was the spreading of violence throughout the earth which resulted at last in the judgment of the Flood. The earth was filled with violence in those days.

Now, after the Flood, God is reinstating this prohibition against taking human life, but he controls it by another tactic. He says he will extract a price for any blood that is shed: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image."

That is more than the process of justice. Human justice does not always do the job; it sometimes fails. But notice what God says just before this: "of every man's brother I will require the life of man." God does not look at humanity as we do. We look around and see so many isolated individuals. We say we live our own lives, we have our own programs. We think of ourselves as separate from one another. But God never does. He looks at us and sees the ties that bind us together, the ties that unite us to the past, and to the past beyond that. In God's sight, the human race is one vast body of humanity, a brotherhood; a brotherhood of one flesh "in Adam." God says that he will require of this entire race a price for the shed blood of a single individual. Murder will be avenged against the race, not merely against the guilty individual. A price is extracted from the whole vast race of mankind.

We are touching now upon a principle that has been active in history and which is extremely important to understand in this present crisis. It is that violence begets violence. God has ordained it so. The price of bloodshed is more bloodshed -- and still more -- until the fact of man's evil looms so large that people cease their delusive, naive ideas and recognize the stark, naked fact of human evil and turn to the God who alone can deal with the problem. Since man is a brotherhood, it means that the innocent can suffer as well as the guilty. The innocent individual will be struck down as well as the guilty, because we are all tied together and the blood price is extracted against the race.

When men resort to violence to gain their ends in one area, they may justify it as being peculiarly needed to accomplish their specific goal, but what they don't see is that, though God apparently does nothing to correct it in that one area, soon a war breaks out or the accident rate increases, or a senseless murder occurs, or violence sweeps a city, or a public figure is assassinated. Men are then forced to learn that God does not take lightly the distorting and despoiling of his image in man. He says he will not, and he never has. That is why violence inevitably breeds more violence, until man at last, in horror at what he has loosed in society, faces up to the fundamental fact that he is infiltrated with evil. Only God can cure it. Only the cross of Jesus Christ can smash this evil in any one of us. That is what God wants us to learn.

Now the sixth provision of this covenant is to instill a desire to multiply and populate the earth:

"And you, be fruitful and multiply, bring forth abundantly on the earth and multiply in it." {Gen 9:7 RSV}

In the light of what we have just seen, that seems a strange thing for God to say. Recognizing, as he does since he is a God of realism, that man is the slave of an evil principle within him, why should he want the earth to be filled with this? Why should he command that the earth be populated by means of human reproduction? The answer is, because it helps accomplish the purpose he is after. In isolation, man finds it easy to maintain

the illusion of his basic decency, and his independence from God.

I was raised in Montana, where we had a very low population density. It was my opportunity to know certain aloof individuals, recluses, who lived out in the hills by themselves. I knew perhaps half a dozen of them, but I never knew one who didn't feel that he was a very good, lovable and kind individual, though the rest of the community did not share that opinion. It is because, in isolation, we do not have to look at ourselves. But as the world fills up, and we can no longer move away from those that irritate us, we are forced to face our own sinfulness.

As the cities increase in population, the earth fills up, the continents overflow and there is no place to run, men discover what has always been true -- that, under crowded conditions, the thin veneer of culture disappears fast, and all that is hidden underneath breaks out. Winston Churchill once commented on the fact that men labor under the delusion that man is basically decent and good. But, he said, given sufficient stress, put under the proper pressure, he said, "Modern man will do anything and his modern woman will back him up."

The seventh provision of the covenant is to guarantee that there will never again be a universal flood:

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every living beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." {Gen 9:8-11 RSV}

God has kept that promise. There have been many local floods since that time but never a universal one, never again a flood to destroy all flesh. The reason for this promise is to indicate that God has changed his method of judgment. It is not that there will not come a judgment of humanity again. The New Testament tells us there will be one, but this time it will not be by water but by fire {cf, 2 Pet 3:7, 3:12}. God is thus saying, I will not judge in this way again, by water, which is accumulative. It is only when water backs up, builds up, and comes in vast quantities, that it becomes a danger to human life. Such accumulation permits a time of fancied safety before the judgment suddenly strikes. That is the nature of a flood. But judgment will come, God says, by fire. The amazing thing about fire is that it is latent everywhere. Strike a rock and fire leaps out. Fire is everywhere. It is God's symbolic way of teaching us that the judgment he will bring is one that is occurring right now, in a limited degree, at least. We can see immediately what the results of human evil are. We do not need to wait until some final catastrophe; we can see it now. There is no excuse, therefore, for being caught napping, even though some will.

Finally, the eighth and last provision is to give a sign of assurance:

And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will look upon it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between me and all flesh that is upon the earth." {Gen 9:12-16 RSV}

That is wonderful. It is the longest section of this covenant, for it is where God puts his emphasis. He repeats it again and again. He sets a rainbow against the darkness of the clouds and says, "That rainbow, that sign of glory, grace and hope, is my guarantee to you that there will never come another flood like this." How peculiarly appropriate a rainbow is. As you know, it is produced by the very elements that threaten. It is set in the midst of storm and darkness as a sign of God's grace. There are some who think perhaps the rainbow never appeared before in human history, and this is its first appearance. That may be true. Or, it could mean simply that this is the first time it is invested with this significance. But it is a beautiful sign of glory and of

grace. It is love's light, breaking through the darkness of man's evil, in an evil world.

Let me close by asking you, do you get the message? God is speaking to us. He is speaking on the dependability of nature, upon which we rest; in the fear the animals have of us; in the meat that is on our table; in the violence that sweeps the world in this hour of history; in the teeming misery of our crowded slums and ghettos. God is speaking through all these things, driving home one fact and one alone: "the imaginations of man's heart is evil continually from his youth," {cf, Gen 8:21}. There is nothing you can do about it yourself. You cannot change the picture alone. All your best efforts to correct this will only make it worse. God has provided a Redeemer, a Savior, and there is no escape apart from him. That is the whole message. Are you willing to face the facts of life and give up this insane struggle to make yourself what you cannot be apart from Jesus Christ? Will you receive the offer of God's love and grace to lead you to the rainbow of fulfillment, of promise, of glory, all that he wants to make of humanity? I am not talking about heaven, I am talking about life, now. God loves us. He is grieved by the distortion of humanity which he sees on every side. He wants to make us men and women living in peace, blessing, strength, glory and grace, as he intended us to live. It can only be done through the One who came to set us free from the octopus-grip of evil that resides in each individual heart. That is the message. God has ordained all of life to keep thrusting that in front of you until you see it and are willing to turn, repent, and believe the grace of God.

Prayer:

Open our eyes, Father, to life around us. Help us to understand ourselves. Above all, help us to see the love which is behind every activity of yours on our behalf, love that wants to set us free, love that pleads for a chance, love that seeks a thousand ways to break through our stubborn pride and to bring us to the end of ourselves, to trust in the One who is designed to be the way by which we are to live. "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." "He that does not eat my flesh and drink my blood has no life in him." Lord, we pray that we might learn these lessons of life; that every one here today, even right now, who has been struggling against the will and word of God will turn and repent and receive the gift of grace and of life in Jesus Christ. We pray in his name, Amen.

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