



Government

- 1 The government of a political community bears responsibility to legislate, enforce, and adjudicate public laws for the safety, welfare, and public order of everyone within its jurisdiction. The guiding norm, or principle, for such laws is public justice.
- 2 The grounds and limits of governmental authority and the terms of its accountability should be articulated in a basic law or constitution. In some countries, such principles have become well established through longstanding traditions without a formal, written constitution.
- 3 For government to be “under law” in this way means that it is not authorized to do whatever it wishes, but instead may exercise its power only within the boundaries of the political community’s constitution, laws, and court rulings.
- 4 Governments must be held accountable to their citizens through a variety of means. These means should include free elections, courts of law, and freedom of speech through independent media and associations.
- 5 While government and citizens hold one another accountable under the law and to the law, the ultimate accountability of both is to God.
- 6 Governments may never act as if their authority is limitless or omnicompetent, because humans also have a wide variety of God-given, non-political responsibilities. The proper exercise of governmental authority in the political community, therefore, must include the legal recognition and impartial protection of human rights and responsibilities – both individual and institutional – that belong to the people and not to government.
- 7 Public justice, consequently, always has at least two dimensions:
 - Upholding the common good of the political community in its own right, which includes protecting citizens from domestic and foreign injustice
 - Recognizing in law the non-political responsibilities that belong to those who live in the territory of government’s jurisdictionThese two dimensions go hand in hand and cannot exist without one another.
- 8 Upholding public justice for a political community must include responsiveness to a variety of interrelated principles, such as *distributive justice*, which holds for the way government allocates benefits, and *retributive* and *restorative justice*, which hold for the way government punishes offenses and seeks restitution and reconciliation. The diverse demands of justice come to light as governments act, for example, to collect taxes, fund education and welfare services, punish violators of the law, distinguish civil from criminal penalties, and withstand domestic and foreign aggression.

Implications

1. Citizens should approach government not as the power that can give them what they want, but as the authority that ought to uphold a just public order for them and for all their neighbors. Government's true function is distorted and degraded if government becomes a mere broker of competing interest groups.

2. The work of government is not a means to other ends, such as human freedom, or economic prosperity, or the enhancement of the nation's strength. Government's purpose is to uphold a healthy public commons in which the great diversity of human activities – as well as complex social and ecological balances – is maintained for the long-term wellbeing of everyone. As government concentrates on upholding public justice, there may, as a consequence, be advances of human freedom, economic prosperity, environmental safeguards, and international peace.

3. Americans tend to see government as the guarantor of a free market through which every other good can be realized in freedom, not by government mandate. Free markets certainly represent an important economic dimension of a diversified society. Yet government has a responsibility to do justice to individuals, families, churches, and other dimensions of society, none of which is reducible to economic considerations.

4. Those who disdain government and the political process dishonor God and their own humanity. It is legitimate – even a duty – to criticize unjust and bad government policies and public officials, but this should be done by calling government to fulfill its proper task and high purpose. This is the purpose of political processes and an obligation of those who enjoy freedom of speech and association.

For Further Reading

Cromartie, Michael, ed. *Caesar's Coin Revisited: Christians and the Limits of Government*. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996.

Skillen, James W. *A Covenant to Keep: Meditations on the Biblical Theme of Justice*. Part III: Justice Administered. CRC Publications, 2000.

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